**John Joseph Barnes**
**Veteran**

**Matthew Nethercott**
**Interviewer**

**Interviewed on November 6, 2001**
**Rome Free Academy, Rome, NY**

**Q:** Good morning, sir.
**JB:** Good morning.

**Q:** I first like to start off by getting a little bit of your background history. Where were you born?
**JB:** I was born in Utica, and lived most of my life in Utica.

**Q:** When were you born?
**JB:** In a snowstorm in January, 1925. At that time we had trolley cars that were running but in the snowstorm they weren't running so my father had a rent to sleigh to take my mother to the hospital. It was a couple miles away to the hospital so they had the exciting time. That was the big highlight of their life at that stage.

**Q:** Very interesting. What part of the military did you get involved in?
**JB:** I was 17 when I graduated high school and the war had already started. I graduated a few months after Pearl Harbor. So I was still underage for the draft. At that time everybody over 18 was subject to the draft. When you are 18 you could be drafted or enlist and everyone who is of age got in one way or the other. But since I was only 17, I went on to college for that fall. I went to a college in Niagara Falls called Niagara University. It was a small men's college. They had an ROTC program, which is a training program for officers and we were required to be in it the first couple of years. After a while it could be a voluntary thing. But the way the war was everybody was trying to determine what branch of the service they would get in, and how they were going to get into it. Of course you could have asked for a student deferment which I did because my birthday came in January and I wanted to finish the year out. I didn't know really what was going to happen. So they gave me a deferment to finish the year off. Before the end of that year in 1943 the college was running out of students. I mean everybody was going into the service. So they closed down the college April. So I still had a couple of months left on my deferment. I went back to Utica and got a job. Everybody was leaving; it was getting pretty lonely in the neighborhood, so I said I'd better find out where I'm going. I went down and volunteered before the deferment was over. So that's when I entered the service, July 1943. Basically, I

was drafted. We had draft boards that reviewed your case and they said we need you right now so come on in.

**Q:** What were your feelings about the draft?
**JB:** I didn't have a problem at all, it just a question of what you are going into. Everybody expected it. My worst feeling was that you might be 4-F, and might not make it. That would be physically deferred, and I wasn't a big guy anyways, I didn't expect to get in any rough business at all. I expected to have a nice office job when I get in the service.

**Q:** Did you expect to be exempted because of your physical abilities?
**JB:** No, but I thought I might not make it; I was really worried about that. I was a little underweight, quite a bit smaller than you are. [Laughs] So, I was happy that I passed the physical. Everybody was going somewhere, who wanted to be left home at that stage? Nobody did.

**Q:** What was the physical like?
**JB:** Oh, pretty cursory, you know, as long as your heart was beating and you didn't have any serious handicaps pretty much you passed. I think they were at the low and lowered their standards. Everyone was going in and we still needed men. So I don't think it was too tough.

**Q:** how did you become part of the infantry?
**JB:** It was just a sheer accident; it was needed at the time. This was July 1943. We'd been in the war for a year and a half. We were fighting in North Africa. We were fighting in the Pacific. The casualties were there. As I said I had one year of ROTC training. We had class a couple times a week and we drilled on the ballfield little bit. The interviewer at camp Upton, which was out on Long Island, where I was taken - it was the induction center, – they did a lot of tests, and interviewed you. He asked "do you have any military experience". I said "no", and then I remembered I had this training for a year. The only thing I ever got out of it was you got a uniform and could get into the movies cheaply. But I really didn't learn very much in that year. I told him about it and that we wore crossed rifles, because I didn't even know what branch of the service it was. He said "oh, that was the infantry". Most of us were shipped down to the infantry training camps at that time. That was what was needed. So I spent I think 17 weeks in South Carolina training, and it was regular basic infantry training.

**Q:** what was a normal day of training like?
**JB:** It varied, but basically it was hike, hike, and hike. You learned the weapons - the M1 rifle, machine gun, mortar, hand grenade - and they put you through pretty rugged training. In fact I began to gain weight. I got up to 135 pounds and thought I was pretty heavy. I was eating seconds at every meal, which I had never

done at home. So, it was pretty challenging but everybody seemed to make it okay. There were a few dropouts but not many.

**Q:** Did you see any of your friends?
**JB:** No, it was a totally new environment; I met men from all over the country. The best friend I had at that time was from Canton, Ohio. There were some from New York City, but no one from my hometown. So I was on my own. It was the first time I ever did anything like that, everything before was with friends. It was a tough experience but everybody held on, because we were all in the same boat.

**Q:** After you finished your training, did you have any time to go back and visit your parents?
**JB:** Well yes, actually I did. I took a test and they gave me a good mark on the test. They said you could go into the Army specialized training program. Go back to college and maybe take some kind of course. About a half dozen of us were selected at the end of the training cycle to go into this specialized training. We had no idea what it was but we knew it was going back to college and getting out of the infantry, anyways. And then, after a week or so, they said "nah, you guys are going back to be infantry". So, they sent us to Fort Meade in November or December 1943, and I got a 48 hour pass. From Fort Meade, Maryland, it took me about 24 hours to get to Utica. That was the last trip I made home. From there we went to New York and the port of embarkation. Of course, we had no idea where we were going. When I came home, I knew I was going to be shipped out somewhere, but had no idea where. So the result of that was, I even lost track of the guys I was trained with except for six or seven of us. The group of us stayed together. In fact, the author of this book [shows book], Dr. Hal Baumgartner, was one of the group that went over with me. He was in the same group from South Carolina. We got on a big boat. I'd say there were 14,000 troops aboard the Ile de France, which was a big ocean liner that came out of New York. So, we were just six or seven guys and again, all in the same boat, just loose in what was going to be called the replacement system. You would be sent over and eventually get in some kind of unit, but at that time we were in no unit at all. We were just replacements.

**Q:** So, you left from New York?
**JB:** I left from New York. It was about a six day trip on the ocean; it was pretty fast. We weren't in a convoy, we were a fast liner. We landed sometime in January in Scotland. We were replacements so we were shipped around to a couple of bases in England until we were finally assigned to a unit, and it happened to be to this unit that was in southern England at the time. This unit had been over there since September 1942, so this is a year and a half later – 18 months training – for what was to be the coming invasion. We joined them as just replacements.

**Q:** What was life on a ship like?
**JB:** Pretty crowded. You want to take a room like this and put six bunks stacked on top of each other, and get them about that far apart… it was pretty crowded. I don't know how many decks were on the ship, maybe 15 decks, and I think we got on the deck once the whole trip. Where you could actually look out and see the ocean. So, it was crowded and it was a mass production movement, so we didn't get to circulate much.

**Q:** Do you have any memories of being sick on the ship?
**JB:** Everybody dealt with that and I would get to the point where I would go to the open spaces… I thought "better keep eating, the best thing is to keep eating", and I never did get sick. And I spent a lot of time later on ships and never got sick. On D-Day I didn't get sick. Close.

**Q:** What was the environment like in Scotland and England?
**JB:** Well, we got in as replacements to the 1st Battalion. "A" Company was one company – ABCD - in a small village called Ivy Bridge. Typical English village, it was small, about 12 miles west of Plymouth. It was right on the edge of the moors, a pretty barren and forbidding kind of land. We never did get trips, even to Ivy Bridge which was just down the road - because the unit had been over there a long time – and being a southern unit – it often got into difficulties in the pubs with blacks who were in other units stationed around there. They'd get into fights at different times so we were barred from going into that village. They would let us go to other towns, taking the train. It was very easy to get around England, even on wartime, on the trains. We only got twelve hour passes, or twenty four hour passes at the most. I don't think I ever had a twenty four hour pass. Most of our time was spent in training and in getting ready for the invasion. That was the biggest problem I had – coming to grips with the idea that this unit was going to be in the invasion. We replacements were thought of as outsiders, and not readily accepted. Most of the men knew each other and had trained for quite a while. We almost became over-strength. In fact, I was assigned to over-strength for a while. This meant I wasn't in any unit. We would land a few hours after the invasion had taken place, in actually the fifth wave, and take the place of anybody who had been injured or killed in the landing. So, a company was made up of about 180 men, but they had a 220 man roster, or whatever you want to call it, so we 20 or so were just extra. But then at the last minute, just before the invasion, somehow I got into one of the boat teams. …And I hadn't really practiced very much with that group. So, it was sort of a catch as catch can – a lot of men were well prepared and some of us weren't well prepared. But, when things happen they happen, and you do what you have to do…

**Q:** What type of training did you do?
**JB:** Infantry companies are broken up into platoons. We had four platoons, three rifle platoons and weapons platoon. There were about 36 men in each platoon.

There are three squads in each platoon so your squad was about 12 men. But for practice for the invasion they divided us, instead of platoons, into boat teams. Each boat team had about 30 men in it. We had six boat teams. We practiced coming out of the boat, landing, and doing what we had to do to get by these pillboxes and defenses that the Germans had designed. We had a pretty good idea what they were planning. There were pictures that were taken before from low-level plane flights along the shore in France. So we knew was pretty much what was there and we do this by we supposed to go to – they didn't tell us where that spot was – but we had a good picture of it. So, when we came out we knew we had to cross the beach, we knew we had to cross the seawall, and we knew there was a pillbox here and there, and we knew what our object was – to capture those pillboxes. So, every man had a job, like a football team – you know, a guard does something, the ends do something else, the backs do something else – we each had a role. My role in the beginning of the training was just to be a rifleman and so we were at the front of the boat – an imaginary boat now – and they said ramp is down and off we would go just filing off into three columns. The first men off would be the rifleman and they would lay on the ground and start firing. The other fellows behind had special jobs. One of the jobs was wire cutters and they had special pliers to cut the wire. These men also had what they call Bangalore torpedoes which were pipes filled with TNT. You could screw a six-foot length of pipe to another six-foot length of pipe, and another one, and push it ahead under the barb wire. When you pulled of the fuse it would blow up side to side and anyone behind would not be hurt, but it would blow the barbed wire. That would begin the first breach. The next man would come in with a light machine gun and a mortar and set up firing at the objective – the pillbox. The last group would be the ones who assaulted the pillbox itself. This consisted of the flamethrowers and demolition team that would be the last group coming in. They would have a big satchel charge of TNT. They would try to get as close to the pillbox as they could and throw it into the hole. We would practice this over and over and when they pulled the fuse on the satchel charge they yelled fire in the hole and get that pillbox knocked out. We had to get across the beach and that fire to get to the pillbox. So, that was the whole plan, it was like a designed football play. Everybody had their job. The only problem was, I was reassigned to another boat in which my job became assistant flamethrower. There were two men, flamethrower and assistant, so I was toward the rear of the boat. The flamethrower was a brilliant idea of some general – of course they used them in the Pacific – but I never heard of any team that landed on Omaha that got to a pillbox and used it. Most of them dumped it right away because it was so heavy – 50 or 60 pounds – and there were two tanks on your back. Most of them couldn't get through the water. They landed and dumped them. It was part of the plan, but it was part of the plan that didn't work. But that was my job at the end. On boat team number five I was flamethrower assistant.

**Q:** when you got to Normandy was there a specific beach you landed on?

**JB:** Yes, we had a whole plan on what beach we are going to land, our beach was called Dog Green, which is the beach that the movie *Saving Private Ryan* focuses on. There was Dog Green, Dog White and Dog Red. And there was Easy, Green Easy, White Easy, and Red Easy. They were all subdivided into sectors. So, you could take this whole grid and put it anywhere. The British and Canadians were the far left and landed on three separate beaches that they had. We landed on Omaha Beach. We were to land with the first division on our left. The 16th Regiment of the 1st Division was to land on the left. We were the 116th Regiment of the 29th division landing on the right. Our sector turned out to be right in front of the village of Vierville, which was a little village on a hill. There were two or three draws leading up the bluffs to this village; just one going up to the village and several others going to the left and right. The cliffs were on our right and we weren't going to try to scale those but the bluffs were straight ahead. They were gentle slopes, but they still required quite a climb to go up to the top. It was at the draws where there were roads leading up to the top of the bluffs, and the one road we had led to the village of Vierville. So, Vierville was easy to spot because it had a church steeple and it had a few houses here and there and the draw. The Germans had built their pillboxes along the edges of the draws. We had a good idea of the whole layout of the land. We had a good idea where we were going.

**Q:** How far back did the boats drop you off?
**JB:** Well, we went over from England in a small ship called a troopship. It was a good size; probably carried 3000 men. The ship dropped us off about 5 miles in the channel. We got into smaller boats called LCVPs, Landing Craft Vehicle and Personnel. That was the American Higgins boat. It was a famous boat built in New Orleans. They built thousands of these and used them for the landings. The only thing was; we were on a British ship. A British ship, had on their davits six or eight of these type craft but they call them LCAs which was a British style the same boat. It was called the Landing Craft Assault. About the same size, 30 men could get into this boat. So that was our vehicle to get to the beach. These boats, like the Higgins boat had ramps on the front end and they could drive it up onto the shore and drop the ramp and we would walk off. We practiced on these boats many times. I would say the unit probably practiced a dozen times. The practice area was in a channel by Bristol which had some beaches like the Normandy beaches. So we would practice on those beaches. I only ran two dry runs - we called them dry runs because they weren't the real thing. I only ran two of them, but the company ran eight or 10 of them. So we had a good idea of what it was like to jump off a boat and onto the shore. The actual landing of course in my case was one of the most fortunate things in my life. Boat Team 5 didn't make it to the shore at all. It was daylight because we launched from the troopship about 4:30 in the morning – and the small boats circled around and around till about six – and at six we started in. We were supposed to land at 6:30. I might not have my time right but about 6:15 or so, and somewhere about 1000 or may be 2000 yards from the beach, our boat took water and for some reason started down. Different

people have different stories as to why, but it sank within five minutes – less than five minutes. We were all in the water in less than five minutes. We were floating around and it was my fortune to be floating around on our flamethrower which he been wrapped with two life preservers. We had rifles and other things that had life preservers which would float for just occasional like that – if we got into the water that was too deep or something. Normally if we would have gotten close to the shore we would've taken those off in preparation to land, but we weren't at that point, yet. The boat went down and we all floated to the surface except one man who was the radioman who apparently had strapped the radio to his back and got caught in the boat and never did come up. We were all floating safely in the water and in a short time heard the firing begin and so we knew the other boats and landed. And that's all we knew. We were not under fire, because like I say we were about 2000 yards out. Besides floating around and wondering what was going to happen to us we were not in any trouble. Some of the landing craft that were coming back from the shore empty and heading back to the troopship stopped to pick this up, because the other boats going in were all loaded. They happened to be the same boats that dropped some of the rest of A Company off on the shore at 6:30. The British officer in charge of those six boats had seen us go down and he said I'm going back when we get a chance to pick them up. Maybe it was an hour or two hours after we went down, I don't have any idea how long it was, but we knew we were too far to swim in so we just waited to be picked up. And we were, by the very same boats that had dropped the company off. We got back on the very same troopship we got off of at 4:30 and it was about noon. By that time we had no chance of going back in. There was no plan of sending us back in, so they took us back to England that evening, or rather the next morning, June 7th. The 29 of us, the remnants of Boat 5, were back in England. So I could write my mother that I was okay that day. I could tell her that I was somewhere in England on June 7th. So, when she read the paper and saw I was in England on June 7th she'd know I wasn't in Normandy. But that's all we could say - we could never say where we were. Somewhere in France, somewhere in England.

**Q:** On your questionnaire you wrote down you were in the Normandy campaign…
**JB:** Yes, [gesturing to a campaign ribbon mounted in a frame] I don't know if you can focus in or not, but there is the campaign ribbon for the European theater, and for each battle or campaign you were in you were awarded a star. They changed it to an arrowhead for the invasion of Normandy, so anybody who participated in the invasion was awarded an arrowhead. So that is the reason for one of the stars, the others were for other campaigns. We had a campaign in Brest, we had a campaign in Central Europe for going across Holland and that area and the final campaign in the Rhineland. So there ended up being four campaigns in the European Theater. I got into all of them some way or the other.

**Q:** Do you have any other fond memories of Normandy?

**JB:** The only ones I have are the ones I acquired since 1979 when I visited Normandy for the first time after the war. That was the occasion of the 35th anniversary of the Normandy invasion. Every year they have a ceremony that takes place on the British beaches and the American beaches. It's quite a big thing over there France. Of course the biggest one for all Americans was the 50th in 1994, which I was fortunate to be able to go back and visit. In fact I've been back to Normandy five times, not counting my war experiences. I've no fond memories of Normandy during the war at all. There was very little contact with the citizens, civilians. Most of them hid somewhere. As soon as the Germans and we were involved in battle they tried to hide somewhere. We didn't see too many civilians because they were gone. So, I don't have any fond memories, no.

**Q:** After the Normandy invasion you went back to England, what were your assignments?
**JB:** Well we were just 29 people who were part of A Company and we had a sergeant who was in charge of our company. The officer with us actually hitchhiked his way back into France on his own. He said "I'm leaving", picked up a rifle and said "you guys stay together". We had no weapons, no helmets, nothing except our clothes. So we had to get re-outfitted. We did not get assigned to anyplace except to go back. We wanted to go back. The Sergeant that I'm speaking of was Sgt. Roy Stevens who is still living in Bedford, Virginia. His twin brother, Ray, was on board another landing craft in the same company. Roy had every reason to want to go back to A Company and he was in charge of our group, such as we were. So we're traveling on our own, more or less, to get back. We had to wait to get space aboard ships that were going back and forth. It was about five or six days before we were able to get outfitted. We were all in good shape - none of us were hurt – shook but not hurt. So our goal was to get back to the unit. By this point, 6 days later, the beach had been secured. Units had moved in 15 miles inland, anyway. There were all kinds of artificial harbor operations going on, since we had landed on a shore that did not have a port. In order to bring in thousands of troops thousands of tons of supplies, they had to create two artificial harbors. That was one of the unique creations of technology that the United States and the British did, to land without any port facilities, but to land those troops with an artificial harbor. They brought ships over, filled them with water and sunk them- old ships – creating a barrier – as a breakwater. And they had these various other machines that floated back and forth from the big troopships or the supply ships. Then they had ships called LSTs that had quite a large capacity and could ram up on the shore, open their big doors – their doors were as wide as this room – and drive a tank off or anything else – trucks, guns, and weapons. So by this time, six days later, there was huge operation going on that wasn't there on D-Day. It was all built in that time frame. We got on a troopship from Southampton, England, went over, got ourselves hooked up with our unit – and went into line with the company. At this stage with the company, although I did not know was going on, I did not find anybody that I knew, except the men

had come with me. So we were just replacements. This was the whole idea of the United States Army at the time. They had replaced the whole company; the only ones I knew were the cooks and the Supply Sergeant. They of course weren't on the line. So they told us "there isn't anybody left". The truth was there were a couple of fellows still there, where they made their way back there. During the course of the rest of the year some guys came back. The officer that I talked about that was in charge of our boat - he lasted three or four days before being wounded – he and I came back from wounds in September. I was wounded in the meantime and came back the second time to the company. He and I rejoined the company again September after I was slightly wounded. It was constant replacements, all the time, every time we had a battle. I told you there were approximately 180 to 200 men in a company - at this stage seldom had more than 100. After serious battle we would be down to 50. And they would just bring in more replacements. So one of the things that happened was that I had no personal contact with any really deep friends. People I knew, yes, but I didn't manage to keep any friends.

**Q:** I'm curious, what type of wound did you receive?
**JB:** After we came back and we rejoined the company, we were pulled off the line. They are actually on the line 15 miles in land, a couple of miles from St. Lo, which was a major city we were going to try to capture and break out of this invasion area. About July 1st they pulled us back off the line – maybe later, the first week of July - pulled us back a couple of miles into a rest area to regroup and prepare for the jump off to St. Lo. So, the night before the jump off I was sleeping in a pup tent with a fellow named Billy Taylor from Virginia. He and I crawled in the tent for the night and we knew we were going to move off in the morning. During the night the Germans started dropping some artillery in. We lived on the ground because we were a mile back and we thought we were not going to have any problems. But they started moving tanks up during the night and the Germans heard the noise. So, I said "Billy, we better move into the hole", which was just a little ways away from us. We crawled out of our pup tent and get over to the hole. I thought I would relieve myself before we settled down for the night. So I just had my boots on, not laced up, and I had my helmet on. Anyways, a shell came in and I turned my head and got shrapnel across the top of my head. It nicked a piece of my ear off and another piece hit the top of my helmet. Anyways, I was bleeding down here and had no idea what was happening or how I got hit. I said, "Billy, I have to go to the aid station". So I took off for the aid station and one of the men at the battalion aid station just wrapped my head with a bandage. He wrapped me up and said, "go over to the hole there and stay till morning", which I did. I must have fallen asleep or something because, when I came around in the daylight, I crawled out of the hole and looked around and there was nobody there. The whole unit had pulled out while I was sleeping in the hole. They were gone, they were on the move. I eventually got back to an aid station – I had a wound, minor wound- walking wounded, and they shipped me back to England. I

had some surgery on my head and I got back six weeks later. I spent about a week in the hospital. So, that's how I got wounded, not in any exciting battle. And, unfortunately, it's how people got killed – they just got hit – they weren't doing anything spectacular – they were just there. With artillery, mortar shells, you don't see who kills you. We weren't doing anything; we were preparing to go to battle. So, this was the second time in my Army career where I missed a big battle. I suppose if I hadn't missed it I wouldn't be here. Taking St. Lo was a major effort. It was July, actually the 11th of July when I was hit and they took St. Lo on the 28th or 29th of July. A few days later the whole thing broke out, and Patton broke out-who didn't do anything – except break out. He took his tanks across Europe in a hurry and the whole German army fell apart. Our unit continued to fight for a while until about August and then they were sent to the Breton Peninsula take the big seaport of Brest. It took us a month. I got back during that battle at Brest. At that stage I was welcomed back is a veteran. One of the fellows that I did know was the Platoon Sergeant and he made me his runner. So I sort of got out of the rifle carrying and carried messages instead. So that was another thing that saved my life because I didn't have to go "over the top". Of course, I could've gotten it any time too because we lost a lot of runners.

**Q:** What type of messages did you carry?
**JB:** In the beginning, the Captain would want to see the Lieutenant or the Lieutenant would want to see a Sergeant, to get together – it wasn't like I carried great important messages – although it was my job to communicate. There were several methods of communication – I was the runner who hand carried written or verbal messages. Another method of communication, and probably the most important, was by telephone. We had wires going to every position that we had. If you stayed in a position a few hours you'd try to get a telephone line up, to a phone that would ring. That way you could call directly back to headquarters. They had so many lines; you knew an army had been in a place by the number of wires. I mean they didn't have one wire carrying all messages; they had one wire for each telephone. The wireman had to do the same thing I did, they had to string the wires out to the positions. I just had to find their positions or run out to them. Later on, I got advanced to battalion headquarters, so I ran from battalion headquarters to the companies. The primary thing we had to do every night was to carry the sign and countersign, because every night it changed. So I would get the countersign from someone at battalion and take it out to the companies. So first I was platoon runner and then it became a company runner.

**Q:** What's a sign and countersign?
**JB:** Well it's a combination of two words. It would be like the sign was "Babe" and the countersign was "Ruth" - sometimes a little more than that. But something the Germans couldn't pronounce very well, or they wouldn't know. I do remember that the sign for D-Day, which we were all told, was "thunder" and the countersign was "welcome". The paratroopers used a little click – you know

that little cricket thing – when they came across someone they used the cricket because they knew they would be scattered all over and they would be running into people all the time. The sign and countersign was used a lot. If people went out on patrol and came back into our lines somebody would shoot at them if they didn't identify themselves. And you had to be careful to identify yourself. We had a number of cases where guys were trigger-happy and either didn't listen for the countersign or didn't give it, and were killed. That was an important thing. The countersign was for the whole battlefield it wasn't just for our unit. So if you get scattered a few miles away and came back to different unit you would still use the same countersign.
Another thing we always carried from battalion was maps up to the company. That was for a change to whatever the plan was the next day. My job was more on my own, independently. My job was to find the third platoon or find A Company headquarters. So when they moved out during the day, I would stay; no problem. We always buttoned-down at night. Sometimes an objective was set out for the day and hopefully they would get to that objective. But whatever, I had to find out where they were, and bring the wire and the ration parties and so forth. We seldom fought 24 hours. Generally, we buttoned-up sometime after dark. In France, in the summer time, the dark is 10:30 at night, there was much longer daylight in that area. So we did button-down around 10 o'clock or even before that. And they would go off in the morning if there was an attack or hold where they were. So it got be a job of finding your way, and finding your way back. I got to be good at that, anyway.

**Q:** What time frame are we talking about now?
**JB:** Well, when I got back to the company in September, we were still in the process of capturing Brest. It was quite a strong point. I don't know how many thousands of German troops are tied up in Brest, but they did not surrender until the very last minute. So, one of the interesting things was getting down into the submarine pens because that's where they surrendered. Just before we got to the shore; we're coming from in land into the city and through the city and down to the shore. The Germans did not surrender until the very last when they had no defenses left. But, there are a lot of defenses around Brest and it was a major campaign. I do remember getting down in the submarine pens and so forth. There, thousands of German surrendered and most of them at this stage were naval people, from the submarines. That was a major submarine base for the Germans.

And then we were moved by the 40 and 8 trains, you know little boxcars, way across France and taken up at the end the September into Germany. We were right on the edge of the German border with the Dutch. From there, we spent the next four months I would say taking a few villages and trying to get closer to the Rhine. There was one major river to cross which was the Roer River and that took us all winter. In fact, we spent almost all of the winter on the Roer River,

primarily because the Germans had attack south of us at the Bulge. So we were north of the Bulge and were not under direct attack in the Bulge. We were stretched out a bit and so were in sort of a stagnant position. So, I got to know the German towns of the Rhineland around the Roer River quite well. We spent November, December, January, and February before we began to move again. At the end of February and into March we moved across the Rhine. We didn't have any problem crossing the Rhine; the Rhine had already been crossed at other places. We got into one more major battle in the north of the Ruhr. The Ruhr was an industrial complex – Düsseldorf and Cologne were big cities - and the Germans had a pocket there. That was our last major battle. This was in March and April. We lost one man, I think, in that whole battle. We were sent on trucks up the autobahn right practically to the Elbe River. All we did there was accept German surrenders. We didn't really fight any campaigns although it was very interesting. The Germans were trying to quickly surrender to us because the Russians were coming to Berlin. We were told we had to stop at the Elbe River. We couldn't advance any further. Capt. Rabbit was our company commander at this stage and he decided that he would cross on his own anyway for a week or two. He found the Russians and had quite a good time with them. But he was on his own. That was the end of the war for us. That was early May, 1945, VE-Day. So that's where he ended up –on the Elbe River just about 50 miles from Berlin.

**Q:** How long after the war ended were you still in Europe?
**JB:** Well, you may remember that we were still fighting the Japanese and were getting closer and closer to the Japanese homeland. So, part of the thing was that some of the troops would have to be transferred to the Pacific to make a major assault against Japan. So June, July and August troops are being sent back from Germany to the states to re-outfit to go to the Pacific. None of us really wanted to try that and fortunately the high command assigned the 29th Division to be an occupation unit. So, our unit was not sent back to the United States which we were happy with because the war was still going on in the Pacific. We were sent to Bremen and Bremerhaven which was the American occupied port that would bring supplies into the Americans still stationed in Germany. The American area was in the southern part of Germany, in Bavaria and that area, but we were assigned to this one seaport that we occupied through the summer of 1945. About this time we began to rotate men back to the states to get home because some of them were over there three years or more. I had one pass that whole year, from D-Day until the end of the war. That was a 24 hour pass to France so that was my one real fun trip, but that was in the middle of battles you know? I got one 24 hour pass to Paris. So, at any rate as the war ended and the bomb was dropped in August the whole thing changed. The unit stayed over there but many of us were shipped back and I shipped back in September.

**Q:** After the war and after occupying Europe, what was it like to go home?

**JB:** Both wars had ended by the time I got home, which I think was late September or October. It was a great time of reunion –many of my friends were all coming home at the same time. I didn't think back at all and I didn't have any nightmares. I did have a lot of resentment about guys in the service that never got overseas. I joined the VFW because the American Legion guys were all stateside, I thought. But otherwise I just wanted to go back to college. I think the state of New York or the Federal government had an unemployment insurance program. I got 52.20 or something like that. 52 dollars. I forgot the name of the program but we were paid so much for each week that we were looking for a job. Most guys were either going back to college or were looking for a job. So, for the first month or so we just hung out together and kept meeting somebody you knew who came back. Not everyone can back. One man who was a friend of mine in high school - him and his two brothers - he was killed in the same unit I was in. I had no idea he was even in it. You know, there were 15,000 troops in the unit and he was killed and I didn't know he was even in the unit. He was killed a month after I was wounded. We didn't talk about that. We talked about getting started again. So, it was really a great time - we looked forward to what was going to happen. I don't think anybody sat down and cried. It's only when you get older you get tears because I guess it means more now. You don't want to be defined totally by D-Day but truth is it's probably true. I certainly didn't want to have anything else to do with military service. Some guys stayed in the service but not many though. Some state reserves. Some had better deals, you know, they got to be officers so it was a good thing to join the reserves or keep in the service. There were guys who just wanted that but most of us wanted no part of it. I think the first thing I did with my uniform was to dye it a different color. Life went on; we didn't look back on it. It was a terrible thing; it was best to get it over with and forget it and build our lives. I spent two and half years in the service and others spent longer. Some of the younger fellas were just going in. They got unfortunately caught in the Korean affair which came a couple years later. So, not joining the service was a good idea. In fact one of the Lieutenants that was in command of one of our platoons – an excellent officer that was in charge of the third platoon – was killed in Korea as a Captain. He stayed with it. So, we went on, that was the most important thing.

**Q:** Did you go back to Niagara?
**JB:** I went back to Niagara, yes, and I was a much better student! We were all treated as a special group – veterans, you know? We didn't want any part of hazing or student activity, and we were a lot more serious about what school was all about. So I didn't look back, but there were guys who had reasons to have nightmares and I knew a lot of them did. They had good reason. I think the worst thing – the man who was the flamethrower - came back and one of the times he got hit his foxhole collapsed on him and he didn't know where he was. When he came out he did know his name. He spent a lot of time reconciling all that. He said he was frightened to death and it was just the worst feeling. I know several

others were buried alive in different ways and that was the worst thing. When you get caught out in a field and you can't move, that's another bad thing. You see guys break down that just can't handle it anymore. I just never got caught in that situation so I was lucky. I'm sure it would've broken down somewhere. It was good to come home.

**Q:** Can you explain your medals to us?
**JB:** Well, these are what I have [showing his framed decorations]…I put them into a case I made myself…

Here is the insignia of the 29th division, the blue and gray … the 29th was a National Guard division from Virginia and Maryland. The blue represents the north, and the gray represents the south.

The top ribbon is a presidential unit citation which was given to a unit not to an individual. It was given to our Regiment for the landing at Normandy. I don't know if you can see the oak leaf cluster, which was given to our battalion for capturing a hill south of Vire. I wasn't with the company at that time but I was a member of the company so I still could wear it.

Over here is the regimental insignia of the 116th infantry Regiment which came from Virginia. It has a long history that goes back to the revolution. In fact it's called the Stonewall Brigade or the Stonewall Regiment after Stonewall Jackson because during the Civil War this unit fought on the Confederate side and was called the Stonewall Brigade. It's still called that today.

This badge in the center is a combat infantry badge with the rifle and the wreath and was awarded to anybody who was a rifleman in the infantry in combat.

This is a Purple Heart for anyone who gets wounded in battle.

Here is the campaign ribbon for the European Theater of operations. The first little attachment is an arrowhead for the Normandy invasion. Then there are four battle stars there, one for each battle across Europe.

This is a Bronze Star medal. That was an individual award, but later on Congress decided to issue everyone who is in combat in Europe or in the war a Bronze Star. So it got to be diminished little bit. So that's the cluster showing two awards, I only really got it once.

This is the New York State metal, and this is a medal awarded by the province of Normandy in France for the 50th anniversary of D-Day. So that's a gift from the government of France you might say. The French people love medals and I have a picture of a man kissing my cheek as he's giving me this medal. They love to do

that. They are very big on medals and frankly most of us who are in the service were not very big on medals. We didn't think about this or this until the war was over when a point system was set up by Eisenhower awarding so many points for medals and so many months of service. The highest number of points got to go home first. It was a fair system because those people who had been overseas in many battles over long period of time got to go home first. So, then we began to get interested in medals! Five points were for that, I do know how much for that, points were awarded for campaign stars… So we began to be attentive to that but up to that point not one of us cared about a medal.

**Q:** Thank you very much.
**JB:** You're welcome.