

Justus Rathbone Belfield

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Delmar, New York

Marilyn Kaltenborn Interviewer

Janice Irwin Camera Operator

MK: Hello, I am Marilyn Kaltenborn and today, May 2, 2012 I am going to talk to Justus Belfield about his days in the United States Army during World War II. In April of this year, I interviewed Mr. Belfield about his years in the United States Cavalry. Once again, we are at the studio of our local public access t.v. station. It is located in the Bethlehem public library, town of Bethlehem in Delmar, New York.

I would like to thank Janice Irwin who is here today, assisting us with operating the camera and giving us other technical assistance.

As I mentioned in our last interview, Mr. Belfield lives in Glenmont, NY with his wife of 70 years. I met Mr. Belfield this past January. We both volunteer at an afterschool program for children in grades 6 through 12. Mr. Belfield, is it okay to call you Jay?

JB: Love it.

MK: For those who missed our last interview, where were you born, and when were you born?

JB: June 27th, 1916 in Utica, NY.

MK: And last month we learned that you joined the United States cavalry in 1936 when you were 19 years old. And you were honorably discharged in 1940.

JB: When they took the horses away.

MK: And then on December 7, 1941, the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. After that, you, like many men in the United States, received a draft notice. After receiving this notice, you told me that you enlisted in the army and were put in the reserves for about one year. During the one year wait, what division were you assigned to?

JB: I was assigned to the 17th Armored Division. But when I got my orders, I was ordered to the 22nd Armored Division. But we're missing one thing here – I was married in the meantime.

MK: Oh, that's right. That's right, to Lillian.

JB: Yes.

MK: And what camps were you assigned to by the military? When you were finally assigned to active duty?

JB: I was assigned to Fort Niagara, NY and from Ft. Niagara, NY to Camp Perry, Ohio and from Camp Perry, OH to Camp Campbell, Kentucky, Camp Campbell, KY to Fort Knox, KY. There I was a teacher to the ARTC, Armored Replacement Training Center, teaching the young men there about weapons.

MK: And how did you know so much about weapons?

JB: Because I had worked for Savage Arms in Utica on the Thompson sub-machine gun, Tommy gun they called it, and the .50 caliber, .30 air-cooled and the water-cooled models of the same, and shotguns, rifles and well, whatever came through at that time.

MK: My goodness. Then in 1944 you were sent to Fort McPherson, Georgia. Tell us about your experiences watching civilians prepare the rifles and other weapons that were going to be used in the war effort.

JB: Well, this has a few peculiarities to it. I was, my unit, my men that is to say, and I were chosen as IDs, Inspector, I'm getting it wrong here. Inspector Generals, inspection. And we did it at...

MK: Ft. McPherson.

JB: No. Ft. Gordon, Camp Gordon at that time. And they picked us to go to Ft. McPherson where they seemed to be having a little trouble. And uh, they asked me if I'd go. And I said, sure and I went. By the way, at that time I was a corporal and the other men were sergeants. So, corporal, sergeant, all it meant was money to me. And so we went there, and we watched them blue the M-1 rifle. Well, it took me about 15 minutes of watching them blue the M-1 rifle and I said, "This is not the way you do blue on a weapon!" So I went in and told the officer in charge that they weren't doing it right. He said, "Oh yes they are!" I said, "No they're not." He said, "Well, how do you know so much about it?" So I explained to him I worked where they made the weapons, and I'd seen much, much bluing. And he said to me, well he says, "You go on back where you are and mind your own business." So I went back out and minded my own business. I didn't tell them anymore.

So, things went along fine. We went home, I turned in my report; I reported the fact that they were doing bluing wrong, but nothing ever came of it. And then I was assigned to inspect the 71st Infantry Division weapons for their IG inspection and they passed with flying colors. Beautiful weapons, I couldn't find anything wrong. I couldn't find anything. My men and I couldn't find anything. And uh, I want to take all the credit [joking].

And then we went to the 10th Armored Division. Well, we went in the first supply room and started checking their ammo and rifles. I, of course, was standing up in the front, watching them do it. One of my men came up and said, "This is no good." I said, "Why?" He said, "Because all of the springs carburized." I said, "What do you mean?" He says, "Well, you pull them back and they don't go back where they're supposed to." And he says, the rear

sight cover is also a spring-type affair, and you pull it back hard enough and the rear sight falls off. So I said, "Are they all like that?" And he says, "Yeah, all that we've looked at so far." So we red-tagged everything, the rifles, then he went on to the machineguns. The machineguns were no good either. They didn't even bother to take them apart, you can't do that! And they did all the machineguns, did the rifles and the hand weapons. All (of) them were no good.

So... rejected the works. Went on to the next one, same thing. Went on to the third one, and we were just about, takes you time before you can set up and do it. And I was setting up and getting ready and all of a sudden, I had to take an officer with me. Poor guy, he didn't have anything else to do, and he was supposed to make a report. I see him go whoosh, like a shot out of a gun head for the door. And I see him give the high-ball [salutes]. There must be something going on. So he comes over to me and he says, "Sergeant, they want you at the front door." So I went up to the front door and there's a two-star general! Whoop hoo hoo! I'm in big company! And the officer, the general in charge of the 10th Armored Division. He says, "Alright, who's in charge here?" I said, "I am, Sir." He says, "What are you finding?" I told him, "All your weapons failed inspection." Says, "All of them?" I says, "Well, I've only done two companies and I'm on the third one. Yes, that one's going to fail too." I said, "I think all your companies are going to fail. All your weapons are going to fail." "Oh," he says, "Oh my God! We're scheduled to go over..." go to Europe in X number of time, days, I don't know anymore. And uh, I said, "You can't go anywhere. You don't have any weapons." Well, he says, "Okay Sergeant. Thank you a million." He thanked me and he asked me my name and what my unit was, my commanding officer and I thought that was the end of it.

But anyway, he says, "Don't do anymore." He says, "My ordinance company'll take it from here." So, I thought that was the end of it. Well, about two weeks go by, and my captain falls the company out, and he says, "I have something here I have to read to you." And he read a letter from the commanding general commending me and my men for the wonderful job we had done. If that had only been a few days later, they would have been in Europe and they wouldn't have had a dog-gone thing to use for the war. The 10th Armored was right in the, right in the...

MK: The thick of it.

JB: In fact they were with good ole General Patton. So, that's, I got rid of that. And went back to Gordon, and I was corporal when I went over there. I came back and I got my paraphernalia, you had to keep it in the supply room when you were gone, so nobody'd steal it. And I took it all back, two big bagfuls, sling them over my shoulder and the supply sergeant says, "Hey, wait a minute. I think I've got something here for you." So I says, "What do you mean?" He says, "I'll show you in a second." He takes these two big bundles of chevrons and sets them on there and says, "Get these on as fast as you can." I says, "What?" I says, "I ain't that big a sergeant yet! I gotta go through..." Says, "No. One shot, you're going to get five stripes." Oh, I was thinking money, money, money, money. [laughter] It worked. I got my five stripes and I had all, those nine men that worked for me? Now those sergeants were under me, officially.

MK: Very nice, Jay.

JB: Yeah, well the officer at Ft. McPherson, if he had been a nice man, he wouldn't have gotten in trouble. So evidently he got in trouble.

MK: And all of his weapons were rejected by you. Isn't that interesting?

JB: And I didn't know they were 10th Armored Division.

MK: That's right.

JB: I didn't know whose weapons they were. But it was lucky I caught them.

MK: Very, very lucky.

JB: Anybody else wouldn't know that.

MK: Right, right.

JB: See? And the good Lord knows what he's doing.

MK: Right.

JB: I don't, but he does. And so that's how I got to be a five striper.

MK: Now when you were at Camp Gordon, I believe you taught yourself French.

JB: I started to. In fact I got the book (at) home right now.

MK: You knew some German because your grandparents spoke German.

JB: Yes.

MK: And then because you were going to Europe, you thought it was a good idea to also learn French.

JB: That was one of the smartest moves I ever made.

MK: So then you could talk to as many Europeans as possible. That was your goal.

JB: We were only there... well, I gotta tell you, yes. Well go ahead.

MK: Okay. Then you eventually received your orders to go to Belgium. And you departed from the harbor in New York.

JB: Yes. We didn't know we were going to Belgium.

MK: Oh, you didn't. You just knew...

JB: We knew we were going to Europe.

MK: And so tell us about the ship you were on, to go to Europe.

JB: I was, I had the privilege of being on the last wooden transport afloat. The USAT (United States Army Transport¹) Borinquen. It was decommissioned after it came back to the United States from dumping us off in France. I'm mad at those guys yet today. Because they dumped me off and I can't walk on water. I'm not Jesus. [laughter]

MK: So your ship was in the middle of a large convoy?

JB: Because it was wood, they placed it in the middle of a 150 ship convoy. And we had little corvettes around us.

MK: And on your...

JB: And destroyers were back of them.

MK: Uh-huh. And on your way over, did you see any enemy ships or anything? Tell us about that.

JB: We had two submarine attacks on the way over. But those corvettes and destroyers made short work of them. And the only reason, the only way we knew that they'd done away with them, big oil slicks on the top of the water. Right in front of us. We had to go through the oil slick in order to go ahead. Yeah.

MK: And then you landed in Portsmouth, Southampton. Explain what it was like to go into that port.

JB: Portsmouth Southampton is a port. You can go to your right, you're going to Southampton. You go to your left, you go to Portsmouth. Inside the, uh... There's a giant, they had a giant submarine net along, over the opening. There was a big opening. And they had tugboats open it up to come in. But they also had gunships there. If a submarine tried to come through, good bye submarine. And we got in, there was probably five ships went through the net, and we stayed there overnight.

MK: And then the next day you went to Le Havre, France?

JB: The next day we, well Le Havre is just across from Southampton Portsmouth. And the next day they opened the submarine net and they had a whole line of, I don't know whether they were cruisers or whether they were battleships or what they were. I'm not that familiar with the Navy. But they were big ships, all the way across. Maybe spaced 100 yards apart, I'd say. All the way across. Well, we got almost all the way into Le Havre harbor and there's four sailors on a, oh what, planks you know?

MK: Uh-huh.

JB: Put together. And they had a little white flag on it, and they were waving to us to go and get them. And our captain said, "No! Don't pull out of line. Don't pull out of line." He told

¹ http://www.202ndfieldartillery.com/Convoy_to_the_ETO.html

whoever was driving, you know, steering our ship. So the one in front of us saw them too. Well, he went across over towards the, uh...

MK: Men who were waving.

JB: Yeah. And he had almost got there when all of a sudden Ka-floom! And the whole tail end of the ship flew off.

MK: My goodness.

JB: Yep. And she started to go down right away, of course. And two tugboats came out quickly. They had the biggest, one of the biggest ropes I'd ever seen. It was about that big around [shows size with arms]. And they slung it out under the back of that ship and got it in on dry ground. Yeah, just pushed it in. That's all.

MK: My goodness. That was close.

JB: I watched it. I was standing on deck watching the whole affair.

MK: Now, tell the audience about the two times you were involved with trains that had Nazi sympathizers, involved.

JB: Okay. So we finally got in to Le Havre. It was cold. It was winter. Each man had two big bags of equipment; his rifle, so forth, carbine. I had a carbine. And we waited and we waited and we waited. Nothing happened. Our captains says, "See those trucks over there? Go over and get on those trucks." Okay. So we get on board the trucks and we went into Le, Saint Valery, which is only a short distance away, by the way. [1 garbled word] camp, Saint Valery. We got in there okay on trucks. But except our, they had put up pup tents for us already, and there was probably two feet of snow on the inside of all these tents. We feared the tent pegs weren't going to hold it, but they did, evidently. And you opened up the tent and there's two feet of snow inside of it.

So my friend Joe, my buddy, he was also a sergeant, he came from Buffalo, by the way. And he said, "What are we gonna do, Jay?" I said, "I'll show you." So I said, "You got a shovel?" Says, "Yeah, I got a shovel." So he got his shovel, we got the shovel and we started digging and digging and digging. We dug a big hole. So, put his blanket in the hole and I put my blanket, well first we put our shelter half down, then the blanket. Then over the top of us another blanket, another shelter half. Got in and warm as toast. Joe and I get in at night, everybody else is wondering how they're going to get in their tent. And I ain't telling nobody. Said, "Come and look and see." And they'd say, "Gee boy. You guys are smart." So they began to do the same thing.

About, oh I'd say well past midnight, maybe two o'clock in the morning, I thought all hell broke loose. I thought they were moving it from one place to another! Sirens all over the place. I'd never heard such an uproar in my life. And I got up and went out to look and see what happened. We were right next door to a hospital unit and they were coming in with these ambulances, two men to an ambulance. Course, that's all they could get in one.

MK: Right.

JB: And uh, this one goes to that tent, this one goes to that tent, this one goes to that one way over there, and so forth. They were directing them. The officer in charge was a major and he says, "Would you men please give us a hand?" And I says, "Sure, I'll give you a hand." Says, "Can you get any more?" I said, "Give me 10 minutes, I'll get half a dozen more." Said, "Okay." So I went down and got my men, came up and we're helping them carry the stretchers...

MK: Right.

JB: ... stretchers. Wherever they want them. And my captain, my old man, he came over and he says, "What are you..." I'm gonna clean it up a little bit, "What are you doing with these guys? You know that's not your, you're not supposed to be over there. You're supposed to be over there." I said, "There's a need for help here, to help unload these ambulances." I said, "And the officer in charge said he needed help and I went and gave it to him." And he says, "Get back over..." Not nicely, a few other words in there. "... over there where you belong."

At that time the major came by and he said, "What's going on here?" and I told him. He said, "You keep doing what you're doing." He went over to the captain, he says, "Captain, you mind your own business. You get back..." and he didn't use any flowery language either. "... get back where you belong." Said, "I'll turn 'em loose when I get ready." Well, we stayed there all night and helped 'em out.

Come to find out the early morning, the first thing we do, there was a train wreck at night. The train was operated by an engineer that was a German collaborator.

MK: And he ran into the station.

JB: He ran, he opened up, when he got near the station he opened up everything and kaboom! Ran right into it. And, but that ain't the interesting part of this story. The guys that were in the front that got killed and stuff took our place. They were supposed to be on the trucks and we were supposed to be there.

MK: Wow Jay!

JB: You say the good Lord didn't have his finger on me? Hey! All the way. And from that day on I wasn't in good relations with the captain. He didn't like me from then on.

MK: Now, Jay, we're nearly out of time today. So we have to thank Janice and the Bethlehem television system for letting us interview, for letting me interview you today. And maybe we can come back to hear more of your stories.

JB: Well, we've only just begun.

MK: I know that, Jay. This is very interesting.

JB: We've only just begun. The second part is more interesting, is just as interesting because it starts out with a train ride too. But yes, we can take it up again.

MK: We can come back again.

JB: I'll have to have my paper so I can rehearse a little bit.

MK: So that concludes our show.

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