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**Narrator**

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**Interviewers**

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**Rome Free Academy. H.S.**  
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MO: Mr. Benson, we'd like to thank you for coming in today, and we'd like to start with your early life. Where were you born?

BB: I was born in Star Lake, New York.

MO: At what date?

BB: December 5<sup>th</sup>, 1917.

MO: What was your education prior to entering the service?

BB: I graduated high school.

MO: Do you remember where you were when you heard about the bombing of Pearl Harbor?

BB: Yes, the living room of my girlfriend, my high school girlfriend. We were listening to the radio—didn't have a television at that time.

MO: Do you remember what was being said, what was being broadcast?

BB: Well, that Pearl Harbor had been bombed. The announcer just thought that it was sort of a joke—he didn't believe it until they had more substantial evidence. Then they came on with the real thing.

MO: What was your reaction to hearing about the bombing?

BB: Shock, strictly shock.

MO: When did you enter the service?

BB: March 1942.

MO: Did you enlist or were you drafted?

BB: I enlisted.

MO: Did you have any reason why you chose the army over the other armed services?

BB: I thought if I enlisted I would get to choose my occupation in the army, but I was dead wrong. I was put in the infantry, which are, you know, foot slugs.

MO: Where were you sent for your basic training?

BB: Basic training was at Camp Croft, South Carolina. It's near Spartanburg.

MO: Could you describe a typical day of training?

BB: Typical day of training was: Up at five-o'clock in the morning, rigorous training all day long until sunset, a huge dinner, a shower, and you were just too tired to do anything else, you went to bed.

MO: How was the morale of the men when you were training?

BB: Oh they were gung-ho, ready to go, whatever.

MO: Did that change as you experienced combat?

BB: It changed when you hit combat, yeah.

MO: Did you receive any extra training while you were at Basic?

BB: I went from Camp Croft, South Carolina to Fort Bend in Georgia for further training—(unclear) infantry school.

MO: what did you do there?

BB: Basic infantry [training]—rifle training, fuel range, rescue, ammunition—the whole thing.

MO: Were you a rifleman?

BB: Yeah.

MO: What rank had you earned?

BB: Sargent.

MO: What division and regiment were you assigned to?

BB: 106<sup>th</sup> infantry division, 423<sup>rd</sup> regiment, company K.

MO: How were your CO's in that division?

BB: Very good. Real good.

MO: Did they have a lot of training also?

BB: Oh yes, yes.

MO: Did you become close to any certain individual during your training and pre-combat experience?

BB: Oh yes. I still have him as a buddy, and we converse regularly—not every week or so, but every month or so.

MO: How big of a role did comradery play in your combat experience?

BB: Great role. Big role. It was—as you say “how great”—it was greatly needed.

MO: How did you find out which theater you were going to be sent to?

BB: I didn’t find out until we were on board the Queen Elizabeth, sailing out of New York City.

MO: Was it just word of mouth? Is that how you were informed?

BB: We just knew we were going to the European theater—that was about it—we didn’t know where.

MO: Where did you land in Europe?

BB: We landed in Greenock, Scotland. We took a train down to Cheltenham, England, and we were billeted at Ascot race track at Cheltenham, which was a race track where the queen used to go to see the races, but we had them fixed up. We were billeted in the stables. They fixed it up with a couple of bunks. We got along fine that way. Then we went from there to South Hampton, crossed the English Channel, and we got off at La Have, France. From La Have, France we went on through to Belgium, Luxemburg, on in to Germany, and consequentially the Battle of the Bulge.

MO: Did you have any preference where you were going to be sent? Did you hear anything different about the European theater?

BB: No, no...

MO: When did you and your men first encounter enemy fire?

BB: It was in the town of Malmedy, Germany. I forget now the exact time... A lot of these things kind of lose you. I know it was in December and it was cold. I think it was in Schaumburg, Germany.

MO: Was there very heavy resistance?

BB: Oh this was the Germans’ last push.

MO: Oh this was the Bulge?

BB: This was just before going in the Bulge.

MO: It has been said by more than one American soldier that all hell broke loose on Saturday December 16<sup>th</sup> 1944.

BB: That’s true, at 3:09 in the morning. That’s true.

MO: It seemed like that to you also?

BB: Yes.

MO: What was your regiment's role in the initial attack?

BB: We were guarding a flank. I think it was the east flank towards the Belgium side—the country of Belgium. We were supposed to guard the east flank.

MO: Were you in the Ardennes?

BB: We were Ardennes forward, yeah.

MO: When did you realize that your regiment, the 423<sup>rd</sup>, and the 422<sup>nd</sup> were surrounded?

BB: Well, it was probably around the nineteenth of December we heard the Germans in the distance. They'd always holler "comderade." We'd holler back—not nice language, but we'd holler back. We knew something—we heard tanks in the distance and we knew that... they were here.

MO: Did you ever think about being captured?

BB: Never thought about it. Up until then we were just fighting on and...never thought about being captured at all.

MO: What maneuvers did your officers use to try to escape capture?

BB: Well... during the night time hours we'd take off our clothes and put on...what you'd call...long johns—they were white, everything was white and set out on patrols at night—it was all snow, deep snow, deeper than this table [gesturing to the table in front of him]—so you wouldn't be seen. That was the best part of it. We found out where everyone was positioned, so in daylight we knew what was to take place.

MO: Did you ever go on those reconnaissance patrols?

BB: Oh yeah.

MO: I heard they used white sheets—that a lot of soldiers took white sheets from houses, because the Germans had the white uniforms.

BB: They did everything, yes.

MO: Anything they could?

BB: Anything that would suffice, you know.

MO: In what ways did your outlook on the war change, when the German forces finally captured your unit?

BB: Well... It really hits...It hits you solid when you find out that you have no freedom. You're at the mercy of another country. You're just under their control completely.

MO: Where were you and your troops led after your capture?

BB: We were lead to [Zurlstien?], Germany. That was a walk of about 50 miles. Then we boarded a boxcar and crossed the Rhine, went into Cologne, and then another boxcar for maybe six or eight days. Then we came to [Badorg?], Germany. That was Stalag 9B. You know, “stalag” is prison camp. In Germany, prisoners are called [kreegee?].

MO: Why did they call it that?

BB: That was just their name for prisoner.

BB: So we were at [Badorg?] for probably...couple months. Then they transferred the noncoms—separated them from the privates—and took us to Ziegenheim, Germany, which was Stalag 9A. There we remained until we were liberated by the 66<sup>th</sup> infantry division.

MO: Was there any reason for switching from Stalag 9B to 9A?

BB: To separate the noncoms from the privates, because they had more control over the privates if they had them alone.

MO: How was you treatment?

BB: That's not hard to describe. It was just starvation and hard labor. That's about it. In the morning they had a thing they called [garats?] tea, and they served it to you hot. We never drank it. We used it to wash our face and hands with, because that's the only thing we had that was warm. You went out on the work detail just a little after sunrise, work all day on railroad.

MO: What were they building the railroad for?

BB: Because the RAF, who bombed at night, would bomb the rail junctions, and we would go out during the day and repair them. They had these heavy tongs—remember the old ice tongs?—we'd clamp on to the rail junction and have to carry them over to certain places and reset them. After you got home—you already walked about five kilometers to work—then by the time you got home it was nearly dark. You were fed a piece of black bread [unclear] about that thick [indicating about an inch and a half an inch thick and a four inch square] with a piece of margarine. That's all you had 'till the next day...next night.

MO: Did you make any friends in there? Did you stay close to that one individual you were speaking about earlier?

BB: Oh I made many friends, but my buddy that was with me in South Carolina was also captured the same time I was, so we went through the whole thing together.

MO: Were you both sent to the same camp?

BB: Yeah. He was a Staff Sargent.

MO: What did the Germans do to the prisoners? Was there any ill-treatment?

BB: Oh yeah. They interrogated you often, and they always interrogated you outdoors. If you didn't speak up right away, and kind of lingered on your answer, they would take a rifle butt and stomp you on your feet—your toes—to get your attention.

MO: Was that mainly the officers, or the infantry men as well?

BB: Officers.

MO: Did you hear any news on the ongoing war, when you were in Stalag 9A?

BB: None. There was a lot of propagandea they gave us: that the Germans were into London already and they were taking over London.

MO: Did you believe any of that?

BB: No. Hard to believe.

MO: On what day were you liberated from Stalag 9A?

BB: I think it was April 14<sup>th</sup> 1945.

MO: What was your first reaction when you found out that you were to be liberated?

BB: Unbelievable. You've heard crowds at football games roar? Couldn't even compete. It was just unbelievable. One of our tanks broke through the Stalag log gate. Behind them came the rest of the outfit in jeeps and halftracks. They came in the compound and they gave us candy bars. That's all we'd had to really eat, outside that piece of bread. We'd go around feeling [unclear. gesturing to his arm], where they were nice and fat.

MO: What division liberated you?

BB: Sixty-six.

MO: What was your treatment like after they liberated you?

BB: We had to stay in the camp. They provided us with rifles and told us to guard some German prisoners that were coming, prisoners they had taken. We were supposed to guard those prisoners, but we put them all out in the field and didn't want to bother them. We didn't pay attention. Then, at the end of the week, they came in with a convoy and took us to Giesen Airport in Germany—a corrugated airstrip—and put us on a loony-bird—that's a C-147—and flew us into Camp Lucky Strike, France—that was near Rouen in France, for some R and R.

MO: What did you do at camp? Did you just relax at Camp Lucky Strike?

BB: First off you stripped your clothes. I hadn't had my clothes off for almost four months. They had a pile of clothes three times as big as this room, from the fellas

who had been coming in. They touched them off with gasoline and burnt them. It was all full of lice. They were just full of lice from the time we were in camp.

MO: Did the Germans provide you with uniforms?

BB: Oh no. Nothing.

MO: What was your treatment like when you returned to The States?

BB: Oh great. Great. We came back on a General Richardson troop ship, and we came into New York Harbor again, by the Statue of Liberty. When we saw that, that was it. Just another roar. They took us to Camp Kilmer, New Jersey, where we had our first great meal. They had orchestras, and they had...everything...speeches... It was just great.

MO: Do you remember who spoke there?

BB: It was the camp General. I forget his name.

MO: You mentioned the Salvation Army. I'm sure that was wonderful.

BB: Oh yeah. We got off in Rouen, France, and the first people to meet us at the plane was the Salvation Army. They had sandwiches, coffee, donuts...They were real great.

MO: When you look back on the war, and your experiences in the European Theater, what do you remember the most?

BB: I remember the most the feeling of lack of freedom. There's nothing like freedom. Every time you look at this [unclear] flag, [gesturing to the American flag behind him] just think of freedom. Without that...nothing matters.

MO: Do you know why that has had such a lasting effect on you?

BB: Just because...well, I think I've become more patriotic. It's just lasted through the years.

MO: Mr. Benson we'd like to thank you for coming and sharing your great story with us.