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Narrator

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DK: My name is Dylan Kaiser and I am here to interview World War II veteran Jack Blanchfield. Where and when were you born?
JJB: I was born in Schenectady on March 10, 1924. Eighty-five years old now, soon to be eighty-six. I am the oldest of five boys. Shortly after I was four, little Jim was born. We moved to Amsterdam. My father was with the Union Star newspaper in Schenectady. We moved to Amsterdam where I spent the rest of my life. Being the oldest of five boys was very interesting because I always got the clothes. When another boy was born I got new clothes and I passed them down. Being the oldest was ok. I have four brothers. My brother Jim died in 1983; he was two years younger. My brother Tom is a retired colonel. He was in the Korean Way. He got the Silver Star which is pretty darn good. He got his [unclear] of the major battles in Korea. After Tom there was Patrick. He is from Connecticut. My brother Bill–the baby–he taught at Utica College for many years and just retired. That's a branch of Syracuse University. I never saw a young lady grow up until our first child was a girl. I had a lot to learn and I'm still learning from it.

DK: What did your parents do for a living?
JJB: My father's latest job was Circulation Manager for the Amsterdam Recorder. Prior to that he was the Assistant Circulation Manager at the Union Star in Schenectady. He got the opportunity to become a circulation manager and we moved to Amsterdam. My mother did not work. She was a housewife. She was the third of six children. Her parents came over from Ireland in the late 1800s, and my father's parents came over from Ireland also in the late 1800s. So, I am of Irish background and my parents were the first American citizens. Both were wonderful people.

DK: What was your educational background like?
JJB: I graduated from St. Mary's Institute in Amsterdam in 1941. I was [unclear] in my class and I got a scholarship to Niagara University for $200 a year. In 1941 the total cost of going to Niagara was $500 a year, not a semester, a whole year. And I got my Bachelor of Arts Degree in November of 1946 after having been in service for a few years. Our daughter is now a professor at the University of Florida. She opened up an Irish Pub in St. Augustine's after she

retired from the business world. She was President of Sara Lee's and President of Burger King. She was pretty successful in that field but then she opened an Irish pub. She had always promised my mother [unclear] at St. Augustine's and her part time job is teaching International Business at the University of Florida.

DK: What was it like for you growing up during the great depression?
JJB: I was quite young. I knew what was going on. My father–working for a newspaper–his office was right adjacent to a railroad station and very frequently he would bring home Henry or Albert or somebody that had just got off a train and brought him home for supper. We didn't have dinner at nights in those days; we had dinner at noontime. We had supper. He'd bring a person home then. I really didn't feel any impact. My father worked and the kids kept coming. I was aware of what was going on because it was in the thirties and I remember my father bringing these men in for supper and maybe they'd go out and clean up the garage or stay overnight. With five boys it wasn't unusual for three of us to bunk in one bed and Henry or Albert who was hitchhiking on a train to stay overnight. That's about my only awareness. We were not hurt financially, thank God. My father was able to work all the time.

DK: Were you drafted into the war or did you enlist?
JJB: In those memoirs you will see I was a sophomore at Niagara University in 1941when they bombed Pearl Harbor. 1941 is the year I graduated from high school. I was part of a college that had ROTC–Reserve Officer Training Corps–which you had to be part of. So, I turned 18, which was in 1942. I had applied through a certain group where you could enlist and I was guaranteed that if I enlisted in 1942 when I became 18, if I enlisted, I could complete that last semester. So I enlisted. I had a little problem with my parents but they agreed so I was not drafted–I enlisted. In 1943 I was called to service. At that point, I went to Camp Upton with some fellas that I met and from there I went to Fort McClellan, Alabama. Since I had been trained in the infantry, I had infantry training at Fort McClellan and that is where I first found out about segregation and it was very, very evident in Alabama

DK: What was the highest rank you ever held?
JJB: Very interesting. I was a private when I went into combat as a replacement. I became a PFC, Private First Class. After I got out of prison camp and came back into service again, I was raised to Corporal. And I was discharged as a Corporal. But I enjoyed what I did.

DK: What were some of the major campaigns you were involved with?
JJB: I got medals for three campaigns. I went in as a replacement of Omaha Beach. A little side note–I'm not very tall. I'd gone over on the Mauritania as a replacement right after the invasion and I had gotten invasion money that we could use to go shopping. I looked in some places, European, African there were

three different campaigns that the medal was given and the 5th Division, of which I was a member, was part of that, primarily in the European. I landed as a replacement at Omaha Beach and there were just varied guys and one of the guys who got was killed was one of my neighbors, a classmate of mine–Kevin [unclear]. He was killed in the invasion. Then, right after that I was tied up with George Patton in the 5th Division. They had been up in Iceland, then they transferred down to the northern part of Ireland, then they were sent to Sherbourne [unclear]. Medals? I said three campaigns, but actually it was only the European campaign–against the Germans.

DK: Was your family aware of your situation during the war?
JJB: No. I get upset about this. I got the telegram that they got when I got hit. Your boy's got killed. I got that telegram–that was November, early November 5, 1944. They got a letter in March and I was still missing in action. So it was a long time before they knew. In the meantime, I got captured. But there was a letter I was able to write. The Germans let me write from the prison–the war camp–and they heard from me in February. So up until that point they didn't really get any[unclear]. They just knew I was missing. The other three guys were killed. They took their uniforms–the Germans did–took their uniforms and they used them for the Battle of the Bulge. [unclear]

DK: Was there anything you were forced to do at the POW camp?
JJB: At first they were kind of rough with me and they were kind of rough with some of the other guys. One pilot was in a cell when I was taken to Forbush in a jail. They took him out. He was met by a bunch of natives and got killed. After we got to a prison camp I felt more secure because they gave us dog tags. 078069. I was probably safe then. The other three guys were killed. We just got hit hard. I was lucky enough; I just got hit by shrapnel. I guess I was small enough; I got deep in the hole. I got stuck by a bayonet once in a while. They used to ask me–it was November 4th, it was a Sunday night. Roosevelt was running for the third time. We hadn't moved much because the tanks had run out of gas. Patton was a great general but sometimes we overran. The questions that most of the Germans' interpreters were interested in–were we really going to a start a concentrated drive? Roosevelt was a key one to start that drive. He was running against Tom Dewey who before that had been the Governor of the State of New York. So they were quite inquisitive about that. And kind of rough. Once we got to camp, the guys who had been with the German army were guards for us so they understood what combat was about.

DK: What was your relationship with the German guards like?
JJB: At first, a lot of questions but as you will read, up until April 27, 1944 I was an interpreter. I got called by the under officer who was in charge–he also had six guards– that we were to march to Denmark. They were going to take us to Denmark to continue the war up in that area and so we walked for about 200

miles or so. We were strafed and lost some of the guys. This one guard whose picture is here–Kurt Popke–he helped us as we went. In that long war, most of the people were throwing out–we went through Teterow, [unclear] and a couple of other villages–and they were hanging out white sheets because the Russians were right behind us and we kept walking. Kurt stayed with us. Once we reached the 8th Division, which was in Schwerin, we had to turn him over to the MPs. From that day until he died two years ago, he and I have been in touch with each other–writing, talking about our kids, grandkids, wives. He was really a nice guy. Once he stopped, we met some other German soldiers. He was the only guard that stayed with us. I don't know what happened to the other six guards. We never saw them again. But, Kurt stayed with us. One night, I was asleep. We didn't get to bed until midnight. He came and he patted me on the back. He said, "Come on–we're having a party." And we went out and walked back along the road and up a little hill and there was a little fire going with rocks and things. There were four young German girls and they were cooking what we'd call hot dogs or something and we had a party. We had a little beer. I was twenty then so I could drink. So we met these four girls out there and I woke up the next morning in a wagon with straw. Kurt leaned over–he was sleeping with me. I said, "You smell bad." He said, "I had a few beers." The relationship was fantastic. We needed him and he needed us.

DK: At the end of your stay at the POW camp were you released or were you rescued or how did you get out of there?
JJB: The under officer came to me and said, "I have been told I have to take all 160 of your guys up to Denmark to continue the war." And we took off and we lost the six guards. I didn't know what happened to them but they gave me their officer's pistol so I knew something had happened. But no, we reached the 8th Division and that was the end of captivity. Right after that we went to Hildesheim and they put us on a plane and we went to Namur, Belgium and then a train to Camp Lucky Strike. Mike was standing on the wing of a plane and he said "You want to go home?" The next thing I know I was on the SS Explorer and liberated.

DK: What were your feelings towards the Germans as a whole?
JJB: There were two sets of Germans. Many of the jobs we had to perform, like digging stumps from trees to build a road, building road blocks and so on. There were Nazis and then there were the German people. And the German people were wonderful people. As it turned out later in life I became in charge of personnel and public relations for Nationwide. A young lady was working for us–she was German and she had married a Hungarian fellow who had been drafted by the German Army. She came from Munich, and she came home one night from school and Munich had been bombed. She was about twelve or thirteen years old and her mother had hung herself. She couldn't take any more bombing. Schwerin was near Dusseldorf. [unclear] To get back to your question, the

German people were wonderful people. We traded cigarettes with them to get food. When we were finally liberated to the 8th Division, I weighed 88 pounds. They were concerned about us. They would slip some food to us once in a while. They were really nice people. If they were strict Nazis, then we had a problem because they came around at times, the German guards, and they checked dog tags. If they found that you were Jewish, which was on the dog tag, we never saw them again. American soldiers were taken and some put on trucks and they took them away. We had to play games with our dog tags. Christians all had to play games. Whatever the German people think, some of them felt that the Nazis were–there was a lot of talk that the Germans after World War I did not get a really good shot at the Treaty of Versailles– the Treaty did not give them much at all. That's when Hitler began to rise and he did a lot for Germany building roads, etc. from what I understand of history. That's how he got involved [unclear] and he went off on a tangent to become what he did become.

DK: Where were you when Pearl Harbor was attacked?
JJB: I was at Niagara University and I start off when Pearl Harbor was bombed–December 7, 1941. Me and the guys were at a movie–cost us 25 cents to go to a movie– we were standing outside of Walgreen's Drug Store waiting for a bus to get back to the university. I have some letters from some of the guys that were in the service. One of my best friends was on a submarine–he survived; he stayed as a submarine [unclear].

DK: Did you agree with Roosevelt's counterattack against the Japanese and the use of the atomic bomb?
JJB: In retrospect, yes. The war would have continued and I think this horrible piece of equipment that we had–that was a situation I think where he had to make a decision. It was probably pretty hard for a guy like him to stop it now. He had this atomic bomb. It was an interesting thing. When we were POWs, Roosevelt died in April 1944. We had a guy in charge of getting information. They told me that Roosevelt had died. That morning we had some guy that had traded cigarettes to get a bugle. So I called them all to attention and made them right-face, face the west, and hand salute and the guy played Taps on the bugle and the under officer and the guards did not understand what was going on. I said Roosevelt was dead. They did not know it, but we knew it. We heard it from the BBC. But, back to your basic question–it must have been a terribly difficult decision knowing he was going to kill a lot of people but it was probably necessary. So August 1945–when that took place, the war was really over. When my mother and father were watching the trotters at Saratoga Race Track. Tough decision for him to make. We had a lot of great men–he and Churchill, the French General and Stalin, I guess, was pretty good for his country. Roosevelt had to make a lot of tough decisions.

DK: What was your transition back to civilian life like?

JJB: Quite easy. When I came back to the States, I had a seventy day furlough the summer of '45. After the furlough was over, in September of '45, they sent me up to Lake Placid. It was beautiful up there; waiters and waitresses, there were a few of us then. Then I was sent down to Camp J.T. Robinson down in Little Rock, Arkansas–that was the spring of '45. Europe had closed up at that point in time. So they put me in charge of a business there. You had to have a certain number of points to be discharged. My job was to supervise fourteen young ladies in the typing pool. I used to get more chicken on Sundays from different families down there. [unclear] Then I went back to Niagara and I was discharged from the military in December of 1945. I went back to Niagara. In the fall of 1946, I got my degree.

A little bit of history–I was sent to North Carolina State College in Raleigh, NC for two semesters with the ASTP–Army Specialized Training Program. I was studying engineering and the two semesters I had there–credits I got at North Carolina State College–I applied to my reports at Niagara. They accepted them. So I got my degree in October 1946. I went back home and went to work at the shoe store Thom McAn's at 40 cents an hour. I had my degree. In 1947, I went on a blind date and then I got myself a job at Nationwide Insurance Company as a claims adjuster and eventually moved up the ladder until I became in charge of personnel and public relations. So, it was a kind of an easy way back in. I knew I had to work; I always had to work. And I had no problem getting back in the work field and finding a pretty girl–young lady–who I met in Hudson Falls on a blind date.

DK: What would you say was the most important thing the war taught you?
JJB: I have to say relationships with people. My relationship with Kurt Popke. He'd steal food for us; he wasn't a Nazi. He was just a gentlemen who had been wounded at Stalingrad–the Russian front–put in a hospital, recuperated. They gave him an easy job taking care of field wounds. I think I learned so much more about humanity, about giving people a chance to show who they really are. That relationship is the basis for that newspaper article; that has the been the basis of maybe sixty years of written conversation with Kurt and his family and his wife Anne Marie, and his two sons Matthew and Christian, and, now his granddaughter Sonia, who is emailing back and forth with our granddaughter Megan. Besides the horrors that I saw, that I had to be part of, to really sit back and take a look at that relationship is something that meant an awful lot to me. I think that is why I was so successful in the personnel business. That I could accept people, what I learned they were about, not what I heard they were supposed to be about. It started when I went to Fort McClellan in Alabama–it was all segregation and I had to watch–we never knew up here. And then to meet a gentleman who was my enemy and become great friends for sixty years has meant a lot. But I hope our kids and grandkids and great-grandkids know. This

past March we had our ninth great-grandchild born on my birthday–now that's the best present I could get.

DK: What do you think our generation and other younger generations need to take away from this interview and the importance of World War II?
JJB: The importance of World War II–now I have to throw it into comparison with what's going on terms of what is going on in Iraq and Afghanistan–we lost a guy from Chestertown. We had a real reason for World War II and the whole country took over. We had women working in factories–we had to get rations to get butter, to get shoes, to get tires. It was a war that everybody was involved with–either they themselves or their families, as my family was. My family was so involved and now we are faced with other wars and I wonder at times, why? I don't have that much to say. But, everybody was involved in World War II and if we hadn't done what we did–I lost five guys that I [unclear]on the corner that were killed in WWII. So many–Bill Hoppe, Andy Hopkinson, Johnny English, Tommy Krone, and Bill Hill–I could go on because I came back. They were killed in different places. World War II was something that we had to do. It meant an awful lot to this country and an awful lot to Europe because if Hitler was let loose, God knows what would have happened. We would have had more than the Jewish people. But there's something in it to me, my parents, my brothers and Pat and her parents. She was still in school at Hudson Falls. Then she decided to become a nurse. The priest that I palled around with, patched a ride with, and drank beer in his car–I hung around with him and he was a chaplain at the hospital in Amsterdam where she was learning how to be a nurse. He said, "I'm having a dance and you're going with Pat [unclear]." I said "Wonderful, who is she?" He said, "You'll like her." He was right. That was '47. We've been married 62 years. Happy and healthy

DK: Is there anything else you would want to say?
JJB: I want you to take the memoirs. I want you to keep that poem. When I had free time I wrote a book. I felt so badly. When I came back from service, my brother Tom–he was still in school. Jim, he was next to me, he was in the Merchant Marine and he found a young lady down in Argentina and he married her and came back with her. Then my brother Pat, when I got back he was ten years old. My brother Bill, when I came back he was six. I remember Bill coming up to me and saying, "Oh, you're Jack?" Anyhow, great adventure.

Can I show you something? This pretty much pulls it all. These are things that I kept. These are pieces of the paper from when I was missing and so on. These were newspaper articles. These were telegrams that my parents got. These are telegrams. This was a picture taken in Namur, Belgium. This is very interesting–I was permitted to write a letter to my parents when I was in prison camp by the Germans. So this was the German [unclear]. This was sent to me in March. It was horrible. This is a map of where we were and where we walked. This is the

original picture and this guy sold his shirt to get a camera and got civilians to take pictures. This was after we got to Schwerin. The tall guy is Kurt Popke. This was a POW camp. This is invasion money–this is money we were given to be used in France and this was the 5th Division. I got paid for work I did when I was a POW–German marks. However, they wouldn't let me go shopping. So I got 36 marks for working for the Germans. This we had to carry all the time in case we had a chance… But that's invasion money–the money there and then these ten francs. These are the letters–vmail–that I wrote. I think one is to my Grandma; one's to my Mom and Dad, and the kids–the boys. Vmail–that's what we could use. And, as they say somewhere in France, I couldn't say where we were with the intelligence. And this is the letter that I think I got from [unclear] when he found out that I was missing and put my name in a torpedo. That's the guy that was in a submarine. These are pictures of me at Fort McClellan and this was the summer I was off. This is my Mom and Dad and younger brothers and me. This was Fort McClellan. [unclear] I was with the 87th Division after I got out of North Carolina State College with ASTP. I was with these guys.

It was the Acorn Division and they pulled me out of there to go over there as a replacement. This group–the Acorn Division–they fought in the Battle of the Bulge and I know three of these guys were killed in the Battle of the Bulge. I always wanted to stay with that group but they wanted me so I had to go… These are pictures of the same group [unclear]. This is me on furlough in Amsterdam. These I had a time out and another guy Dan Cognan and I–we hitchhiked up to South Carolina and we met these two girls, two pretty ones. I can't remember their names. This is Kurt Popke and his wife, and one of their sons, I think Christian–the oldest one–Matthew came next. This is a letter from [unclear] Can you read it?

DK: "In accordance with your request your personal property which was received at [unclear] will be forwarded to you at the above address."
JJB: This is a letter I got from a [unclear] in NJ who was a POW with me. In it he said two things that were very important. Jack Dehoff. The under officer was in charge. We had one guard–we called him Peanut Head–he was shell-shocked. One time he pointed his rifle at some of the guys who were working building the road block. He pointed his gun at them and they were afraid he was going to shoot them, so they clocked him and carried him in. One of our guys was carrying his rifle. In this, Jack says he was caught with Peanut Head. He was cleaning Peanut Head's rifle and Peanut Head was darning his socks. The under officer, John or whatever his name was, he came in and he couldn't understand why Peanut Head's rifle was being cleaned by an American POW and Peanut Head was darning his socks. That was one bit of trouble. Dehoff used to get in touch with a French priest and they had the BBC, so he knew what was going on. So he knew when Roosevelt died. We had that service and so on. Dehoff was in charge of pouring the cement and the sand together, and we had to build wooden

stations so the sand and concrete could be poured into them. From this side of the road they would come out this way and from this side of the road they would come this way. So that you had to come through these two, but the Russian tanks couldn't make it through there. However Dehoff mentions in here that he didn't understand German so much. That's why when they took down the framing that we had made out of the wood that we had poured sand and cement in–he had put about six times the amount of sand in as cement, and all of a sudden it all collapsed. So he writes in here in his letter that another time we went on strike. We said we weren't going to work anymore on Sundays. So I had to tell the under officer that we were going on strike; we weren't going to work anymore on Sundays. It took a little while and I got put in solitary. We went on strike and we didn't work anymore on Sundays. That was it. That was a [unclear] letter and a bunch of other letters that I got from guys. [unclear] This is a letter I wrote to my Mom and Dad. This was my diary that I started where I wrote poetry. And this is a poem I wrote about [unclear]. There was a guy from Hudson Falls that was a POW. His name was Jackie O or Yoles. [unclear] We were stuffed in box cars and traveled from one end of France to the other and when I got back home I became a member of Nights on the Road. You had to be in railroad cars. Here in the States they put me a member of that. These are Kurt's–he had a camera and this is what he gave me. This is a letter I wrote to the kids, my brothers. And this is a copy of [unclear] picture and [unclear] this is Kurt and this is one of the German soldiers. And this is, I think, one of his first letters. And this is from Sonia, his granddaughter. [Unclear] This is one of these guys from Rochester. I mentioned the Lake Placid Club for R & R. This guy was a POW with me, Raoul, he was from Texas. This is Kurt here, his wife Anne Marie–she died in '04. This pretty little thing is Sonia, their two sons and their kids are all here. [Unclear] This was when WWII was over. It was August. This was signed by Mario Cuomo, Governor of the State of New York. I had to give a speech up at Prospect Mountain one time. They gave a POW medal and I got a POW medal. I got a Purple Heart. The Germans bandaged me. If you have time, take a look at the memoirs. That's me practicing with my M1 and the bayonet. That's Harry Truman. That's a speech I made up at the mountain. That's Kurt. This is my discharge from the 87th Division, Acorn Division–great bunch of guys. They caught hell up in the Bulge. That's my discharge papers, honorable. [Unclear] This is my brother Jim– he was with the Merchant Marine. It wasn't until about three or four years ago that the Merchant Marine was really recognized. I got his papers–he had died since then. My brother Tom–he got the Silver Star. That's where my brother Jim is buried. That's Tom, Porky, we used to call him. That's Tom. These are letters I received. Back to the beginning again. That's Kurt and Anne Marie. Another picture of Kurt and Anne Marie in Germany. And that's Sonia. I was invited to her wedding a couple of years ago. Couldn't make it though. [unclear]