Albert J. Brach
Narrator

Eric Grasso
Jack (unclear)
Interviewers

April 27, 2006
Orchard Park High School

Albert Brach	**AB**
Jack	**J**
Eric Grasso	**EG**
Unnamed Teacher	**T**

T: Today is Thursday, April 27, 2006. We are at Orchard Park High School doing our Hometown Heroes interviews. We are interviewing:

AB: Mr. Al Brach

T: --who served during World War II. The interviewers are:

J: Jack ? [unclear]

EG: And Eric Grasso.

T: Ok, I'm going to leave you guys for about a half an hour. Learn about what life was like in the service during World War II, and have a good time.

AB: Thank you.

J: Mr. Brach, were you drafted, or did you enlist in the Army?

AB: We enlisted. The day after Pearl Harbor we went down to the post office; the line must have been a mile long. We got there about 6 o'clock in the morning, got up to get sworn in at 11:00 at night. We had to go through all the physicals. Got up there and they said, "What branch of the service are you going in?" I said, "The Coast Guard." "Oh," he said, "it's filled." I went up with three of my friends, and we were all going to be together. "Well," he said, "you've got your choice. You've got the Marines, you got Air Cadets, you got the Navy." I said, "All right, I'll take Air Cadets." He said, "You've got to go back upstairs and take some more physical." Two-thirty in the morning I got sworn in, and then I left two days later for Fort Niagara.

Got down to Fort Niagara and started going through all the movies they show you about sex and everything else. You got to the point that when you come out of the movie you had to put gloves on before you'd shake hands with a girl. (All laugh) It was that bad! It scared the heck out of me. I was a naïve little kid coming out, and holy mackerel!

One morning—this is January—cold—and I didn't get up in time to get completely dressed to go out for roll call. The overcoats were right down to the ankles so I wasn't worried. I just had my underwear on, put the overcoat on, fell in. Which man do you think the sergeant picked to open up their coat and check the clothes underneath? Me. Three days on KP on a train going to Florida to the Air Cadet school. Well, I'm telling you. You ever tried slicing bread on a train that's moving? One slice is like this (gestures a thin slice) and one is like that (gestures a thick slice.) Making salad: break up the lettuce, put it in there, pour the mayonnaise in, get in with the arms and mix everything up. Same with the eggs; mix the eggs up, every now and then a shell would fall in—hey, mix them right up with that, too. Of course, I didn't eat what I cooked, and that was three days on that train going to Miami Beach.

Then we got our rooms in a nice hotel right on the beach, and then we started training. We spent from probably 6 o'clock in the morning until 8 on the drill field marching and the rest of the stuff, getting in shape that way. Then we'd go to class. Class… how long did it last?.... maybe six months. There were less instruments on an airplane than there were in a car, so you didn't have to learn too much. It was just getting used to it, like getting used to driving a car. Only this was easier; there was nothing to bump into.

Finished there, and at that time you had to be a mechanic, because if your plane got shot down or any damage was done to it, you had to help the mechanics on the ground with it. This served two purposes: you were more careful with the plane. Then I went to Crew Chief school in Newark, New Jersey. Then I went to In-Line Engine school in Detroit. From there I stayed in Detroit and tested Liberators when they came off the end of the assembly line to see if the Army would accept them after they were built.

And then from there to Salt Lake City, and after Salt Lake City I went to Colorado Springs, Colorado, where the air force base is now, Peterson Field. There we were trained in combat crews to go overseas on Liberators. I think I was there about six months. Then I went overseas alone. From there I went to North Carolina to board the ship to go over with the invasion of Africa.

When I got to Africa they didn't need bomber pilots, they were fighter pilots because of Rommel's force in the desert there, and the tanks. I went into P40s. The P40s had the scoops on the bottom. When you went over the sand, it would pick up the sand and it would cut down the operation of the plane when you were trying to maneuver up there. They brought P38s in—unbelievable! You could fly it on one engine, it would do anything you wanted to do. That finished the German Luftwaffe off, our crew.

I met a fellow in January. I was in the hospital in Florida and he was in the bed next to me. I hadn't seen him in sixty years. He'd shot down 14 German planes. He was in our group, the first fighter

group. That was Eddie Rickenbacker's outfit. Anything they wanted to get publicity for, it came to our group. Of course the best thing was, the fun thing about it, was the steam engines. You go down with your cannon and you get that front of the steam engine where the water was, and it just explodes up into the air. That was the best time we had with it, because nobody got hurt and as far as the maneuvering and fighting in the air, it's a lot different than it is today. Because when you were up there, you could see the man in the other airplane that you're going after. The Germans were just as young as we were, 18 years old and everything else. It was a learning experience, I have to say.

EG: How old were you when you enlisted?

AB: I was 18. I was just in my first year of college. I'd been going to Canisius on a football scholarship.

EG: You grew up in the Buffalo area?

AB: Oh yes, in Riverside.

EG: Oh yes. So you said it was definitely a learning experience?

AB: It was. You were getting involved with people from all over the United States. A chance that you'd never had before. Their lifestyles were different. Of course, most of the lifestyles were fairly the same because we were coming off the Depression. Everyone was slim and trim—I think I weighed 130 pounds at the time. As I said, it was great getting to know these other fellows. Because they were just as nervous as you were. Everybody went down and everybody enlisted and at that time there were not too many draftees because they had more than enough enlistments to fill the quota they needed at the time because they didn't have the camps to train them in. As the war developed, the camps developed, and it increased the people working back in the States doing the training.

J: Do you remember your first days in the service, what training was like? Do you remember any of your instructors?

AB: You know, I don't remember any of the instructors. Everything went so fast. The thing was this, the war was starting and they had to get you out. It wasn't one of these things that you spend 6 weeks here and 4 weeks there, it was hurry up and go. When you graduated from Air Cadets, you graduated as a flying sergeant. And then they give you the other ranks when we got over to Africa. In the Air Force, in our unit, there was no rank. The mechanics, the cooks, everybody ate in the same mess hall, ate the same thing, went into town together, enjoyed each other. Because each one depended on the other one, so I mean as far as the private to the captain, everybody was together, there was no saluting. Nothing like that in our unit. It was like a family unit, and it worked very well together. It wasn't a big unit, it was a small unit, but it worked very well together.

EG: Were there many casualties in your unit?

AB: No, ironically enough in the Air Force, you never saw a casualty. If anybody got shot down, they were taken care of where they were. A couple times we had bombing missions over Ploesti, the oil fields, and when somebody would get shot up—like one day the copilot, I was saying something to him and I looked over and he was laying there. He got a piece of flak right through his helmet, right through his head, and he was dead. We stopped at another airbase, took all the casualties off. When we got back to our airbase, nobody knew anything except that there was somebody missing. We never saw any of the blood and guts that the men on the field, the ones that really did the fighting, saw.

I can remember one Christmas it was overcast and we couldn't fly and I grabbed the mail truck and I went up to the front—I think it was at Ploesti. I couldn't believe it, when I got out of the truck, the bodies of the men were all piled up waiting to be put on trucks to be brought back. It was cold, they were all frozen. But this was the first

experience I had where I saw something like this. Other than that, you never saw anything like that in the Air Force. All the casualties were dropped off someplace else, and then we came back to our own field, and went on to our normal life. We had to repair the plane when we got back, the holes that were put in from the flak, and stuff like that. But other than that, you never saw any casualties.

J: Were you or any of the other members of your unit ever taken prisoner of war?

AB: No. That's one thing… The bomber crews, the ones that came over from England that were shot down and were able to recover by parachute or whatever it was, they were taken prisoners of war. With the fighting planes there was nothing like that: you were either shot down or you went back to your base. There was no in between, as a rule. I can't think of… I only used the parachute once, and it was a scary experience, even though I'd practiced before in Air Cadets. When you have to do it, when you're involved in something, it's a different feeling. Everything happens so fast, but still you have that little fear of what's going to happen, where am I going to land? And you're not so much worried about getting shot as the landing. Today, those parachute groups…. I don't know how they do it. Once was enough for me, landing.

EG: Were you ever awarded any medals or citations?

AB: Everybody got the same thing. Every time you went from Africa, you'd get a medal for being in Africa. You'd get a medal for being in Italy. You'd get a medal for going into southern France. And you'd get your Good Conduct medals, and every so many missions you'd get another medal for flying. Then you'd get oak clusters added on to that. What was nice—I don't remember exactly how many missions it was, something like maybe thirty missions—you'd get a ten-day rest camp. And you had your choice. The first one I took on the Island of Capri—you lived like a king. The second one I took to Switzerland because we hadn't had milk in a year-and-a-half or two, other than powdered milk. In Switzerland you had ice

cream and milk, so the ten days we spent in Zurich were great. And then the next one was over in Bari, Italy, on the Adriatic. I had a beautiful home overlooking the Adriatic, on a little hill. I'd get up in the morning and the maid would open the curtains. You'd look down on the beach and you'd see the men pulling the big nets full of fish in, and they'd be piled up on the beach there. They'd sit there when they'd got the nets in, and grab a bottle of wine and a piece of bread, grab a couple of the fish and eat them. I watched them do that for about three days and I said, there's got to be something to this. So the next day I went down to the beach. I grabbed one of those fish that was still wiggling and I tried to eat it. It didn't work—the bread and the wine didn't make any difference (laughs)--it just didn't taste very good! You got treated like a king on the rest camps, they really took care of you.

J: How did you stay in touch with your family when you there?

AB: I was very poor, very poor. In fact, it got to the point that my family got in touch with the Red Cross to see where I was and what I was doing. I didn't write letters that often. I didn't write letters, didn't take pictures. Just did what I was supposed to do, and did a lot of sightseeing. Whenever we'd get moved to a new base, I'd take a jeep out where we were flying and go to the various little towns and visit the churches and the various art exhibits that were there. I didn't miss too much, from Morocco on up through Italy. The last place in Italy was an island off the southern [unclear] of France. We flew from there for the invasion. We'd fly over in the morning and empty our guns. We had four machine guns and one cannon on the front. Then we'd go back and another plane would be ready by that time; we'd climb into that plane and go back over on another mission. We did that all during the invasion when they were going in from England. We were going in from the south, from that way. But like I said, it was a learning experience.

EG: Before you went out on your missions, did you have anything special you did for good luck?

AB: You know, strange as it may seem, when you're at your age, you have no fear of anything. You don't have enough sense to be afraid of anything. So you didn't think about anything until it was over. You were kept fairly busy all the time, you didn't have too much time to think, really. It got a little lonely on Christmas and on your birthdays, and stuff like that when you're over in your tent there, but other than that you were kept pretty busy really.

J: What did you do for entertainment while you were there?

AB: The USO would bring shows over, like Bob Hope. They were all good shows. Then we hooked up a little radio in the tent that we could get whatever station was on the air at that time on it. Then behind the tent, we had a belly tank off of our fighter plan that we used for fuel on the longer missions. We had that mounted there, and we had a copper line running into our tent, and we cut one of those large barrels in half and put it in there, because in the winter it got cold, even though our tents were in an olive grove. Whosever turn it was to light that 100 octane gas when it came in, you'd get your eyebrows burned off every time, when it bounced up like that, but it kept us warm. Other than that, it was good. There were about four guys in the tent on cots. We traveled a lot. In Africa, we used pup tents, one-man pup tents. We moved, we were constantly on the move.

The engineers were great. Our airfields were large pieces of metal that were hooked together, and they would come in and lay that airfield out. First they'd make it level with their bulldozers, then they'd lay it out. And then possibly, within another two weeks we'd be moving up as the front moved up, with our airfields. The engineers would just keep moving the plates up there, making new landing strips for us. They were great, the engineers. They did a terrific job.

EG: Do you recall any particular unusual event that happened, while in Africa or while in the service?

AB: Going into the Casbah was something, an experience. The architecture, the people, the music, the dancing and stuff was something I'd never seen before. I enjoyed that. As I said, every place I went there was something new that I'd never experienced before, and that experience was great.

J: I know that a lot of guys that have been in the service develop a great sense of humor. Did you or any of your buddies do any prank pulling or anything like that?

AB: Well, I don't know if this should be on television. We had one of our guys that did a lot of drinking, and so he'd come in loaded at night. He'd fall in his bunk fully dressed, and he'd fall asleep, and his hand would be hanging out of the bunk. So we went and got a pail of warm water and put his hand in the warm water. And you know if you have your hand in warm water, you've got to go to the bathroom. So he'd go to the bathroom all over himself. Pranks like that. The only thing is, nobody every stole anything from anybody because they were taken care of by the men in the grove. That's one thing we never had to worry about. But yeah, there were pranks all the time because you had to amuse yourself, even though you did get some amusing anecdotes on the radio. But a lot of the radio in Italy was in Italian, so you had to learn basic words so you could get along.

Then when the war ended, I went to the University of Florence for a semester, and I enjoyed that very much. I took an arts course there. They picked—I think it was fifteen of us—from different groups to go to school with the Italian students to see if we could compete with them. It was excellent.

EG: Do you recall the day that the war ended, and what were you doing?

AB: We'd just come back from a mission, and the war ended and we heard about it and we celebrated. And the next day we were getting ready to go to the Pacific. We got our planes ready, and then they

said "We've got a new shot that you're going to get so you won't catch the flu or anything else going from this type of a situation in Europe to the Asian theater over there." So they gave us all a new invention, a flu shot. We didn't get out of bed for two weeks, we were so sick. I think they were experimenting, so by the time we got out of bed and got everything else going, the war in Japan had ended. Then we couldn't all come back at the same time. The length of time that you were there were the number of points you had, and by the number of points you had was how they designated your return to the United States. I figured I had to wait a while, so that's why I went to the University of Florence. And then it took us three weeks to come home on a Liberty ship. I didn't think we were ever going to get there. I think you could have rowed faster to get back. On the particular ship that I was on, the Nisei Division, the Japanese-American division, most of them were on that ship. These men were terrific. They had medals coming out their ears. They had fought on that ground and they had pushed the Germans back so far, it was unbelievable, but you never heard a word. They were very quiet. they sat and played cards all night. They were afraid of the ship, so they didn't sleep. They just kept playing cards and sitting there. And it was really an experience, even that, coming back. Other than that I can't think of anything. You know, you forget stuff after sixty years. Sometimes I can't remember what happened yesterday! (Laughs)

EG: Before you went to the university, did you visit your family back home?

AB: Oh no. Once you left…. In the states, I came home twice. My mother got operated on for her gall bladder and for a thyroid condition and I was able to come home four days at each time for that. That was in Colorado and in Detroit. I took the train home each time. But other than that, once you were overseas, you were done. You stayed until the war ended, that was it.

J: While you were overseas, did you keep any kind of a personal record, maybe a diary?

AB: Nothing.

J: Just all up here (gestures to forehead)?

AB: That's right. As I said, I wasn't prone to doing any writing at the time.

EG: You probably didn't have much time to do that anyway, they kept you so busy, right?

AB: We were kept busy most of the time.

EG: So you went back to school after the war. Did you keep any of your close friendships with your buddies?

AB: Not really, because there was nobody that lived close. Our group was from all over the United States. In fact, the group that I went into, I was the baby. When we'd go into town, "You can't go into that place, you can't drink this." I had about 30 fathers watching me all the time. We'd get our beer. You'd get six cans a month, and you'd get six Cokes a month—or maybe it was every week or two weeks. I don't remember just what it was. But they'd take my beer right away: "You're not doing any drinking. Here's our Cokes, you've got all the Cokes." I was watched in the service by these older men better than I was watched at home. My father never bothered me this much. It was, as I said, it was great. Eddie Rickenbacker's outfit wasn't something that was started up for the war; it began in the First World War and it continued on. That's why I said that I was very fortunate that I was able to get into this outfit, and they watched me very close.

J: After your time at the University of Florence and you came back here, did you continue school, or just go back home?

AB: I went back to Canisius College, and picked up where I left off, but no football after that because the Army was paying for my way

through. And then I took all the exams that were available, the police, the fire department, the state troopers, and I guess it was probably June of 1946 [sic]…. I started college in January of 1946, and in June on the same day I got the acceptance for the State Police and the City Police. Well, the State Police paid $900 a year and you had to live in the barracks. The City Police paid $1200 a year and you lived at home, so I took the City Police because I could go to work at 4 o'clock and keep going to college during the day. I did that, let's see I was in college… I graduated in 1949 so I finished in three years. I went right through the summers. And when I graduated I went back to night school for four years to get my masters degree. And then I started teaching school during the day and working in the police department the second shift. I was on the traffic division, and this gave me a little time because I worked baseball, football, hockey – all of these sporting events and all of the rock shows. This gave me time to get my schoolwork done and everything else. I worked in a very good school, the kids were like sponges, so no problems at school at all. The problem was keeping up with the kids, that was all.

J: Did you join a veterans' organization?

AB: Yes, I belonged to the Veterans of Foreign Wars and also the Legion.

J: What kind of activities did you do with those groups?

AB: Well, at first when I had time we went on honor guards when the men died, and then there were parades. We have meetings every month, which get smaller every month. I don't know how long the organizations are going to be able to maintain themselves. This goes for all types of organizations that they had, the Knights of Columbus, and the rest of them. In the 1940s and 50s, there was more camaraderie, people got together more. There wasn't television to take you away from anything. You'd sit down talking with your friends and go off someplace… It was different than it is now, a completely different world. It was a more relaxed world to begin with because everything took its own time, and it wasn't electronic

like it is today. Like, I got a new car and I don't know how to drive it other than put it in gear and go, with all the buttons on the dashboard and maps there. It'll probably take me a year to learn what's going on with it.

T: (Returning) How are you guys doing on time?

EG: Good, maybe five or ten minutes?

T: No, you've got to wrap it up. So, final words.

J: Anything you'd like to add to this interview, anything important that you got out of the military experience?

AB: No. I think that a military experience is something that every person should have. That's one thing I agree with that's going on in Jerusalem, they all have military experience when they get out of school. I think it helps develop your personality. It helps you to get involved with other people that you wouldn't be involved with ordinarily, and doing things that you wouldn't ordinarily do. It gives you a different perspective on life. As I said, I think a year in the service is the best experience anybody can have.

J: And a one-of-a-kind experience at that, right?

AB: Right.

EB: I guess the tape stopped, but I was wondering how did you meet Mrs. Brach?

AB: I was teaching school in Buffalo, and she was a young teacher just coming in, and I met her there and then we got married a year later. She also taught school; she was an excellent schoolteacher.

EG: Can I have her full name?

AB: Dorotea S. Brach.

J: Thank you very much (shakes hands).

EG: Thank you (shakes hands).

AB: That went awful fast! We were having fun.