

Melvin Brandenburg Oral History Interview

MIKE ZAMBRANO: This is Mike Zambrano. Today is sixth of September, 2012. I'm interviewing Mr. Melvin Grover Brandenburg at his home in Rock, Texas. Sitting here also with his son, Bruce Brandenburg who will help me out with this interview. This interview is in support of the Center of Pacific War Studies, Archives for the National Museum War, Texas Historical Commission and for the preservation of historical information related to this site. OK, my first question always is where and when were you born?

MELVIN BRANDENBURG: 1922 in a place called the town of Pine River. It was a farmhouse, a homestead. Actually I was born on the living room table.

MZ: Really?

MB: (laughter)

MZ: Wow. Did you have brothers and sisters?

MB: I'm the oldest of five brothers.

MZ: What did your parents do for a living?

MB: Worked in a paper mill. And my mother was just a home wife.

MZ: Since you grew up through the Depression, can you tell me a little about what that was like? And did your father stay employed during that time?

MB: What?

MZ: Can you tell me what it was like for you living through the Depression?

MB: Well money was very scarce. And if company came, then soup was thinner but we never turned anyone away. Then I lived at Granite Heights, which was a quarry town. And my dad went to work in the paper mill and then bought the farm in the village of Brokaw. We farmed and he became a supervisor in the mill plus farming.

MZ: So he had two jobs?

MB: Really, yeah.

MZ: Wow, so did he work through the entire Depression?

MB: Lots of paper mills was in the name of the company but it was actually in Brokaw, which was seven miles north of us. Because it was a dam there and they had a river. The company owned the town, company store, etcetera.

MZ: OK. I assume you went to high school in the area.

MB: One year. And then they bought the farm and that was the end of schooling.

MZ: So just ninth grade, maybe? So what did you do on the farm?

MB: Dairy farm. Raised dairy cattle and of course, food for the family.

BB: Plowed fields, with your two horses, Barney and Dan.

MB: Yeah. I seen the wrong end of horses for a long time.

(laughter)

BB: Those were the names of the two big horses. In fact I have a picture out there in my garage, an old black and white picture where it shows my dad when he was probably 16 or 17 behind two huge workhorses plowing fields.

MB: We were hauling wood because we cut our own fuel for winter. That was part of living in Wisconsin. You didn't buy much of anything during the Depression. I don't mean that smart, it's just the way it was.

MZ: Right right. And I assume everybody helped out, it sounds like that?

MB: Pretty much so. Before fair time we would pick wild raspberries and strawberries and take them and sell them and spend all the money trying to win a foolish rubber ball or something. (laughter)

MZ: Were you working on the farm when the war broke out?

MB: Yes and in the mill also. Because we were in the village. We owned the only private land in the village, was our farm, a hundred acres. I had a job at the mill plus staying home and helping.

MZ: I forgot to ask you, what were the names of your parents?

MB: You have one, Grover. And Verna was my mother's name.

MZ: Do you remember where you were when you heard that the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor?

MB: Yes, I was in a filling station, filling up an old Chevy with gas. It came over these little tin radios at the station.

MZ: Do you recall anybody's reaction?

MB: No, not really. Well I thought they weren't drafting 'til 21 and I was just barely 20 so I had a year's grace, which changed shortly. And while we're on that subject, they drafted us for the duration plus six. I was drafted and also in Wisconsin you couldn't vote or buy a drink, but they could send you over to get your rear end shot off. Which was the subject of most every orientation when we got into camp in the service. And that soon changed, but that would come up every Saturday. After inspections we would have orientations for an hour before dinner and that would come up every Saturday. Then they lowered it quick to 18 because they needed men, I believe. So even when Germany surrendered I had to be there six months for occupation and our unit was already getting in the water to go fight Japan. So there was no end for us. That's why later in the war before we went to Berlin the guys were pretty jumpy when they held us and let Russia take Berlin, knowing that the sooner we got the war over, we had no intention of just

going over and sitting in Germany. Because we were infiltration, I think it makes a difference. And the fighting too makes a difference. You have a different -- I won't say more ruthless -- but you had something pushing you, more than just being you had to get the damn thing over and go home. We didn't care to be there in the first place. I lost a brother on May 17th, got crushed in the Channel. And he was two and a half years younger. He enlisted over my warning not to. But it's history now, so.

MZ: Since you were drafted, where did you have to report to?

MB: We reported to Milwaukee but Wisconsin didn't have an induction center. So we reported down there and when we got -- I think it was two weeks to get our house in order when we left then. And when we left we went down to Illinois. Fort Sheridan was where we were sworn in. That's where they gave us the uniform. Wisconsin had the University of Wisconsin hospital was connected with the military in Wisconsin. I don't know the connection but it was close.

MZ: Did you have any friends that were sworn in with you?

MB: Oh yes. Two of my good buddies joined the Air Force and became pilots. So they weren't with me but we went by train down to Milwaukee.

MZ: Now when you were drafted you didn't get to choose what service you got to go into, did you?

MB: No not unless you quick jumped. That's what they did, they quick jumped and enlisted by choice. And I was a farm boy, I didn't know enough to do that.

MZ: So where did you go after being inducted?

MB: I went down like I said to Fort Sheridan and from there we went on to Alabama.

MZ: Did you travel by train?

MB: Yeah. Coach.

MZ: Was that your first time on a train?

MB: Probably was. I don't remember. The train went through our town but we used to -- it was my first impression of black people, we didn't have any colored people up there. It was too cold for them I guess. The porter would always come down to the coach train. They had a main train that took the wealthy people up north for tourism and stuff and he would always come down with his little stool for him to step on. And as young people we would go there and wave to him. Because it was unique.

MZ: So you get down to Alabama. What happens then?

MB: Well I went in in September, the time of the year that we're here now. We were in wool ODs because it was cold up north in Wisconsin. And they dumped us off in a big drill

field, black top. I thought I'd melt before I ever got through. (laughter) So that's how I got there. And we had tar paper shacks that the Army used to have.

MZ: Sounds like they built them quickly, just for taking troops in. How many men would sleep in each one of these, do you think?

MB: Probably about 16 to 20, maybe two dozen at the most.

MZ: And when you got there did they start issuing clothing and equipment?

MB: We had them from Fort Sheridan but they marched us to the barracks and I got transferred. There I did six weeks basic training and I went to Camp Butner, North Carolina. Because they activated the 78th division. See in World War One it was deactivated after the war and then they reactivated to get more troops. So it became an opportunity in that they needed a lot of everything. Sergeants were a dime a dozen then. If you were in an older outfit you would have to earn your stripes and for me just because I was tall, walked straight, I became a squad leader. With a plastic band and they gave me the first M1. We had old Winfields, the old bolt action. Which I liked better by the way. The M1 has a lot of faults. Garand, that's the company that made it.

MZ: So since they made you squad leader did you get any rank also?

MB: No (inaudible).

MZ: Well that sounds pretty good too. Can you tell me a little bit about what did you do? You did drills?

MB: We did drills. And I enjoyed it really. I'd come from the farm where we worked hard. Some of these guys grumbled but for me it was a breeze, I had no -- but very good food, I'll say this for them. My buddy and I, Johnny Case, who became a company clerk, we stayed in the same company for three and a half years. We went to the same little pokey little school in Brokaw. But we got along. We went in, got a pass and went into Fort McClellan, Alabama, that was the first fort we went to. We went to see what a Southern town was like and I got a -- we got on the bus and just rode the bus. No particular place to go and I'll always remember we came to a -- I would call it, you would call it a town square where they had a circle and -- the center of town. He stopped and opened the bus and Johnny and I got in. We were in the front of the bus. We sit down and he stopped at an island, I'll say, at the middle of the square, and opened the front doors and the back doors and there was a lot of people there, a lot of colored people there. And they were trying to get in and he just jammed

the door shut, he didn't let anybody up front. Johnny was smart, he kept quiet, but I never was that smart so I saw that our driver was built like a bruiser. So I said to him, "Sir, why did you leave those people standing back there?" Said, "Didn't they have money?" And he said, "I don't know." And I said, "Well is this public transportation." And he said, "Yes." And he said, "Son, you've got a lot to learn." I'll never forget that comment. It stayed with me 70 years. Here and now plain as if he'd just said it. He didn't say Yankee, he just said, "Son, you've got a lot to learn." And he was right.

BB: That's because he wouldn't let the black people on the bus and I thought you had told me when I was younger that you told the bus driver, "Well isn't their money the same color as my money?"

MB: It was quite a jar, a guy who'd come from my background and because for us, everybody was same, equal rights as far as -- like I said -- and it was Depression. The train would come through and stop and there was a lot of people on the train trying to find jobs. Coming from the Chicago area, basically, Milwaukee. And they would come -- we had a company house that had -- I'll call it a shed in the front, a storm shed where you came in. And they'd come there and Mom would give them something to eat. They'd come there

because we were about a block from the tracks. They'd come over and ask for food and I always felt sorry. I always remembered this; one man came over and asked for something to eat and I think we had apple pie for us up there. And Mom said, "Well, our food is gone but if you want a piece of apple pie we have dessert left." He said, "Does it have pork lard in it?" She said, "Yes." And he said, "I'm sorry I'm Jewish." I'll never forget that. I had some things happen early in my life that changed me for life. What a statement, to have that deep a religious background.

BB: Starving to death.

MB: And I knew he was hungry. That he would say, "If it has pork it's against my religion."

MZ: It's quite a commitment.

MB: What?

MZ: It's quite a commitment.

MB: Well to me it was. And he was hungry and he wasn't going to get anything to eat for a long time up in the north. The north end was all logging towns in Wisconsin. Wisconsin, Pine Belt, most of St. Louis. Down the river, there was no dams then. Both of my grandparents were Canadian French and he was a logger. They would cut the wood in the winter and jack it up near the rivers and when the high water melt came they would float down the

Mississippi. Their name was [Dranson?], my background is half German, half Canadian French. Had a little Pennsylvania Dutch mixed in there too, so I was all American. (laughter)

MZ: That's good. Did you see any more signs of racism -- since you had the story about the bus in the South?

MB: Not really because it was -- Indians weren't much in the business of working life and I don't remember having any Indians that ever stayed in the paper mill. They would come and work for a bit and then go back to the reservation. Not -- there was no friction between them.

BB: Well just to mention -- you talked about racism up in Wisconsin, there was really basically white people and Indians. So if there was racism, it was more directed towards American Indians, not like Hispanics or blacks, compared to further south that you went. The only racism that we would see would be against American Indians.

MB: Well our town was very mixed. You had the Italians, the Naples. They were more the people that took care of the machines as far as maintenance. And then we had the big Polish area and --

BB: But it was basically a white --

MB: Yeah, all white. A lot of ethnicities, but I think the cold had a lot to do with it -- if we did have a colored

person working they were generally gone in January.

(laughter)

MZ: Can you tell me more about your time in Alabama?

MB: It was six weeks basic training. A lot of walking and closer drill. But all we did was learned how to handle a rifle, target range a lot. In six weeks you don't get a lot done, new men you know. But I think we only had a scattering of regular Army guys. And they were in bleached out, one piece fatigues. They wanted it that way so they stood out and with a little contention there, they said that we were draftees. We told them that the only reason they were regular Army is that they couldn't get a job. So that type of good natured banter went back and forth quite a bit.

MZ: Did they have obstacle courses during these six weeks?

MB: Oh yeah. I could never see any sense of that. We had a good bed to sleep in in the barracks and we'd go out and sleep in the woods. You when you got a problem.

BB: What kind of obstacle courses did you have to go through?

MB: We would run, crawl over logs. They had ditches dug, we had to run down them. Just basically making it hard to get around. (laughter) I guess it was to build your strength.

BB: Would that be in full gear?

MB: Yeah. And of course basic training was basic to try and teach you to listen to commands and not think.

Automatically, that's the concept to drill. It makes no sense except you answer commands. It's your command conscious, that's basically all it is.

MZ: You said earlier you would use the Springfield rather than the Durand?

MB: Bolt action. That was a World War One gun.

MZ: What other weapons did you train with?

MB: Well we had a couple. The way they had the weapons you were training with mortars, machine guns, etcetera. And had I been in the heavy weapons company we'd have been training with 90 holsters. We didn't -- basically it was more or less to be able just to rifle on your own and we got used to only canteen water was one a day. See now, water had become, the first thing they do is tell you to drink a lot of water. But that at time in the Army training you got one canteen and you rationed it so you didn't run around the course and drink your water. So that part, I don't know if I answered the question.

MZ: Well I did think about hand grenades. Did you do any hand grenade training?

MB: No.

MZ: None? Wow.

BB: What about handguns?

MB: We didn't have them. The weapons people had handguns, we didn't.

MZ: What about bayonet training? Did they train you with a bayonet at least?

MB: Yeah. And of course in action I broke mine the first day trying to dig a foxhole in frozen ground. It was cold over there at the Battle of the Bulge. I always figure I'd carry one shell instead of use the bayonet. Otherwise I didn't have a bayonet after action. I had one during training because you had to stick a sack they had full of straw. Thankfully I never used it. To me it was gruesome, even coming from a farm where butchering was a part of life. But that was different. Am I making sense here?

MZ: No, it makes perfect sense. You saw butchering on the farm. You're right it is different. To be so close and put a knife in a man like that, it's personal almost, face to face. Yeah, there's a big difference. Let's see so you just left of at Camp Butner in North Carolina. You do additional training there?

MB: Oh yeah, we stayed at Butner for almost a year and a half. See it was a reactivated division and at Bunter we built a lot of barracks and stuff, the walkways and the Army did. The outside contractors built the actual buildings but outside

headquarters there was a -- I don't know what they had that for -- but they built up the camp. We actually used houses for target practice, for mortars and stuff. Because it had been farms. Butner became a big camp. I think it was a very small Army headquarters outfit where they had some older, nice buildings. But basically it was all new barracks, two story barracks.

MZ: Do you remember something called the Carolina maneuver area?

MB: Yep. Tennessee was more where we went for the maneuver area.

MZ: Yeah, that was another one I came across. I was doing a little bit of reading and well -- were they maneuvers?

MB: Yep, up near Murfreesboro, Tennessee. Yeah we went -- they would have, in North Carolina we'd go on night missions and so forth but stay overnight sometimes. When we went to Tennessee it was a complete division maneuver and I don't know why but they picked me to be a chemical umpire. I was a staff sergeant with a sergeant truck driver and a Jeep and a truck and smoke pots. They sent me to chemical college in Florida, Tallahassee. And I'd also had a foot that was smashed and that swelled up they sent me to a general hospital for a couple months to get it back. Metatarsal, you know what that is?

MZ: I've heard of it.

MB: It's a bone behind your toe. I hit my toe, the next one is the metatarsal, peeling logs back home for the paper mill we had to peel them. A log dropped on my foot and smashed it. Never went to the hospital in those days. But then we went on a 25 mile forced march and when I come back the next morning my leg was swollen up to my hip, so they sent me to the hospital for a while. And when I came back we were going to maneuvers. So I think that's why they made me a chemical umpire and all I learned was if you light a smoke pot you can't put it out, you have to bury it. Water doesn't work. But theoretically it was so you could go to the company, the leader of whoever was fighting and it would light a smoke simulating the shells busting and it was to cover an area in smoke. And we stopped all the traffic on the highway, the main highway, finding out how it worked. (laughter) I read in the paper they wondered who was responsible.

MZ: So they sent you to a school to learn to do this?

MB: And the funny part about that, in Tallahassee when I got there they didn't have a school set up! This was earlier. So I was on a two week vacation, that's I had to find out myself how to light the thing. Typical Army, you know?

MZ: Right. Let's see. So if the Tennessee maneuver was a division sized maneuver, what was the Carolina maneuver like?

MB: Each company would do on their own. I would call them problems more than maneuvers. Just go out -- basically teach you how to read compass. We had quite a few guys spend the night in the woods unintentionally. They would send you out, drop you off at a certain spot where you were supposed to be. There would be a truck come pick you up if you followed directions. And if you didn't you walked back, so. (laughter)

MZ: Motivation for getting it right.

BB: Motivation to learn how to read a compass.

MZ: Let's see, so you said you were at Camp Butner for about a year and a half. So at what point do you actually get shipped out to Europe?

MB: We went to Camp Pickett [sic], Virginia, and then we went to New Jersey. Camp Kilmer, New Jersey is where we shipped out from. But Pickett was more or less -- during that time I was in the hospital so I really never had much to do with Camp Pickett but it was more or less pre Kilmer.

MZ: That was New Jersey?

MB: Yeah. Shipped out Pier 51, New York.

MZ: And how long did it take to get across the Atlantic?

MB: Think nine days. I'm kind of guessing here. We went over in the fall, later we got to England it was November, the middle of November. So we hit the North Atlantic in the summer season. Over and back, because I came back in January. So both times, going over it hit the lid off the cover. So they had to seal one section of it. And we had some ships that dropped -- what do you call them, a Navy would know it -- bombs.

MZ: Depth charges?

MB: Yeah. When we got there we almost ran into another ship because they broke formation. They were doing a lot of that during that time, in 1944. As far as the German sub.

MZ: Was that the only incidence going across?

MB: We went across on Squire, was the one that built the Liberty ships? That's what we crossed on. I came home on the captured US -- they named it the US Lejeune but it was a German luxury liner. We came home in about six days I think.

MZ: You came home on the Lejeune?

MB: They renamed it for an Army general or something, his name was Lejeune. But it was a German equivalent of our USS, so.

MZ: And you said it was the Squire that you went over to Europe on?

MB: Yeah, what do you call them?

MZ: Liberty ships?

MB: Yeah, I think it was the guy that -- I better not say, I'm not sure where he was from that built them but he built a lot -- they were smaller, lighter, faster. They weren't a battleship.

MZ: OK. So what did you do in your spare time crossing the Atlantic?

MB: Mostly played poker. We were awful cramped, being that they had to close off that section. Most guys were laying in the walkways. It was a good crossing but not necessarily comfortable.

MZ: Was the food still pretty good up to this point?

MB: Yeah. You learned to eat with one hand on your tray. Because if you had to go up -- (laughter)

MZ: It might leave you.

MB: They served on the second deck. You're a Navy guy, what do they call it right below. They didn't serve up on the top deck and when you had to go down and eat, sometimes during the rough weather would come right over and you'd be standing in line there and you had to duck. Salt water would shoot, when it dries it just --

MZ: Let's see. So you crossed and from what I read you landed in England?

MB: Portsmouth.

MZ: Portsmouth. OK. When you get to England what did you think of it? Different country?

MB: Well you walk down one block of old Chicago and it's England. Old, old buildings. The place we were at had a big fireplace. We billeted in the houses. There was no camp there. We billeted, the house had a huge glass -- where you put a ha'penny in. It was a half a penny, about that big, copper, and when you put it in it would burn for about a half hour. Fireplace, then the gas would be gone. Otherwise you had to burn coal, the other half of the fireplace was coal. And if you had coal you could burn that and stay warm. But I never was too impressed with England. I went and seen the Hyde Park, you heard of that? I went back to England on a furlough one time. Just to get out of Germany for a while. The people were trying to make a living and we didn't have a fighter's -- we weren't with England. The only thing I know is they had a -- the fire on their tanks would reach much more than ours would. So we could blow out pillboxes from a further distance. Because we had to carry them on our back, the flamethrower. But they had them on tanks. We had English, if we could get a hold of one of them to work with us. Kind of opened

the way of the Siegfried Line, you heard of that? I walked through that.

MZ: You mentioned that you were billeted. Were you billeted with a family, I guess?

MB: No. I would say the house, I guess they would clean out the block. I don't know where they would put the people, and the military would take over.

MZ: So what did you do in Portsmouth? Train more?

MB: Not a whole lot. We trained haul coal, I know that. We had to help them get, we went and get, haul coal with the truck to get something to eat. But we weren't there long. We went over, landed at (inaudible). The reason we were later into action actually was because of -- you're acquainted with Italy, General Clark?

MZ: Yes.

MB: They really got wiped out. And we had just come off division maneuvers. And they came to our company and took everything from a sergeant and a first lieutenant down because they needed men desperately. They were quick at Anzio. And so our division actually fought off the boot. They just kept us cadre, skeleton crew, and again I got picked, don't ask me why. So they stayed there and shut down the Army specialized training corps and a couple other Army based schools and refilled the division. They didn't

have time to draft. So I wound up with guys telling me they can't do this stuff. They promised me this that and the other. Well I told them, "Right now you better make sure that finger works." So we landed late, we had a second training area. How do I say that? Yeah. So when we hit England, they had already landed on Normandy. And we came in behind them in time for the Bulge.

MZ: Where in France did you land?

MB: Le Havre.

MZ: And once you get out in France, where do you go?

MB: Moving up to the front. Walking and trucking. Le Havre was just a town that they had bulldozed a road through. That probably got wiped out like we saw in a lot of towns in Germany. The thing I remember about France was mud. We came in the early part of December. Mud and cobbled streets, all rocks. Yeah, that's what I remember. But we billeted and we rode on trains. You heard of the 40 and eight? 40 men, eight horses, and little French trains? World War One? Well we used them again. That's how we crossed France, when we weren't walking.

MZ: What did you think of the French people?

MB: I have Canadian French in me, I want you to know. They -- connivance.

MZ: Really?

MB: Anything you had, they'd buy it if you could sell it. When I went back to Paris that's all they were interested in buying, if you had any P38s or any pistols. And I know being down there it's just the group that the GIs met. I think there's a lot of good French people. But I don't think Army, for me to give an opinion, I don't think the Army had a good way of meeting good people. You can read that wherever you want to. (laughter)

MZ: So you say you start moving east. Did you go through Belgium?

MB: Yep. That's where we fought from. We broke into Germany through Belgium.

MZ: But when's the first time that you actually see action?

MB: In the Battle of the Bulge, 14th of December. I got wounded the 16th.

MZ: At where?

MB: Sixteenth. Of December.

MZ: So you were wounded, where were you hit?

BB: Through the arm.

MB: Always make sure people show you. And also I got one through the helmet. Right through the center, knocked in the box, all the way off. But it saved my life! Now this sounds funny. It was winter and we had dug foxholes along a line. We tried to go through Simmerath and probably got

wiped out that intersection. We found out we couldn't go down the road. They had it so zeroed in. We lost half our company there. A lot of my good buddies. So we went through the fields. And between the fields we're walking so much it was kind of an indentation. They had trees planted along the farm fields. We would leap frog one to the other. It was going through those fields that we paid it. That's where the Bulge really started. The people that got shot in the field where I got wounded were covered with snow and stayed there for 40 days before it was over. So the first day I didn't get -- it was frozen dirt, we were on kind of a wedge where two of these fields came together. And the first shot the guy fired was the middle of the night, we didn't sleep. Sleep was a foreign word when you're fighting. And the first round he shot hit that frozen sand and you know how you flinch? That saved my life. The next one took my helmet off, knocked me cooler than a cucumber. In the foxhole. And I think I had to be stupid the next day to jump out of that foxhole. Run across the field. I got hit in the field laying in the hole. All they could get a shot at was the company in the back. Never seen a medic. Took my belt off, put a tourniquet on with the help of an Army buddy. And that was

it. Went and tried to find the aid station and couldn't go back into town because that was wiped out.

MZ: Which town was that?

MB: Simmerath.

MZ: Simmerath?

MB: Germany, right inside the -- we went through the aid belt of the Bulge. In my mind I can't picture Germany because it was such a -- and to give you an idea, 106th was next to us. I'm talking divisions now. And we were on the right, and below us was nobody but Germans but Patton, you know. So we were on kind of a wing out there. And they went through, the 106th. That's when they probably got wiped out. And every German you met had an American uniform on.

MZ: I remember hearing about that. The MPs? All the Germans that were disguised as MPs?

MB: No, regular soldiers. And America knew. Because they'd captured so many and took their uniforms and every road sign they had turned, trying to screw us up. So if a guy stopped and asked you for a pretzel you know what you did, you shot him. And there was a lot of them. Our company word was Baby Ruth. I had a good friend Danny, my nephew, his father, his wife's dad named was [Borke?] which is a -- they came from a very German community there in Wisconsin. And he didn't know the password. And they put him in with

the Germans. He had a hell of a time getting back to his company. And after the war I went and I told him, "Why don't you join some of our --" and he didn't want one word about Army. What he went through. I don't know how he handled prison but -- let me ask you this. Say you're up on a line with six guys and you capture two or three Germans. Are you going to send two or three of your men when you've only got six to begin with?

MZ: Well that's kind of a tricky proposition. (laughter)

MB: You know you're going to be shorter yet. Many times prisoners are taken back and quote, tried to get away. But I always used to tell the guys, "Be back in 10 minutes." Enough said. It just was one of the dirty aspects of war, I say. It wasn't murder because if you send them all back you're dead. That was a strict pressure on sergeants. Making snap decisions on the field. They don't put that in books. You learn that the hard way.

MZ: Were you a platoon sergeant at this point?

MB: Staff sergeant. I had 12 guys. We had three squads in the platoon.

MZ: What regiment were you in?

MB: I was in the 78th division, 310th.

MZ: 310th.

MB: Second battalion.

MZ: Do you remember what you were doing when the Battle of the Bulge starts and you first hear about it? Because I remember hearing that the line was very quiet and there wasn't any expectation of any attack.

MB: That's the worst time. When you're moving up, when walking up and nothing happens. The silence is deafening because you know they're there. And if I can defend, it'll take three men, three to one, to get to me. You pay a price for moving up. I guess you're talking to the wrong guy here.

MZ: No, no. Tell me more about the Bulge. It was very cold, obviously.

MB: Bitter, terrible. Very. And some guys -- I personally, being from Wisconsin I got through the grass, to the foxhole, keep that damn snow and sleet. It was cold. I think sometimes it was a blessing because a lot of guys hurt bad that they couldn't get to froze. I'm talking 70 years and I'd break down here.

MZ: How did you keep warm?

MB: You didn't. There was two of us in the hole, you just -- many guys lost their feet.

MZ: Trench foot?

MB: Frozen. Frozen and I seen guys crawl back to get a cup of coffee because they couldn't walk. Yeah, I'm talking 70 years ago.

MZ: No, you're doing fine. Your memory's good. Who was your trench buddy during this?

MB: You never had a good friend because then you'd miss them too much. Jenkins was my buddy, he was a corporeal. I don't know if he made it, I never saw him after the Bulge. Lot of -- we had a guy came from Calgary, he was a very ruthless first lieutenant. And I saw him laying, a shot had taken his entire throat out. Blood squirting up there. So it's -- I would say I never really had a good buddy until after the war when a bunch of survivors got together. Then you could open up and become a friend. Except my buddy Johnny Case who I went to school with. But he was at headquarters. They picked him out of the crew to become a company clerk. Our company clerk got a woman in trouble, a foreigner overseas. So they shipped him early and they got Johnny helping as clerk. But he was really sharp. He come up and they'd pay you once a month and he would bring the payroll. So I'd get to see him one day a month. So be it, that's the way it was.

MZ: How much did they pay you a month?

MB: I think I got 10 dollars for serving in combat. And then for being married I got extra. I think nine dollars was the total. That's just a guess too, I don't remember. But 10 dollars, you got 10 dollars if you were in actual

combat. That's what that was. Even Eisenhower couldn't lower that.

MZ: You know I think Eisenhower had less ribbons than you did.

MB: Oh these are just -- some of these are battles, you got European, occupation, victory medal. But these here are the real ones.

MZ: What did you get the Bronze Star for?

MB: (inaudible). This was late in the war. And they counterattacked I guess. I figured if I didn't get killed now I'd be lucky so I led the guys cross a field under mortar fire. And we captured a big shot or something in Germany. But it was crossing the field instead of following the rest of the company around. But it was a big Army hospital, a German hospital and the officer there was taking the German hospital and we cut across and cut them off. Big guy come driving one of these big German cars, you know. I made a mistake I should have shot him. He got away. Captured him later. He was trying to get more guys for the German army and right after he sneaked out on us we got a counterattack with a company of Germans. (laughter) We should have held him. He just told his driver to gun it. We missed him.

MZ: So you got the Bronze Star for going straight across the field to try to --

MB: I guess so. Many other guys would have gotten Bronze Stars too. I don't know. We had a big parade over in Germany and I think it was three of us that got it. Some got a Silver Star. Two of my buddies got a Silver Star.

[Hinchy?], you know him. He got it because they walked through a minefield and captured a couple Germans. We had to get Germans to figure out what was going on. And they went over and came back, walked through a minefield and never got hurt. Brought two Germans with them. So they gave them a week in Paris and the Silver Star. Because they could take those guys back and work them over.

MZ: So they got the information that they needed?

MB: Was about a dam. [Schönbrunn?] Dam, you ever hear of that? That was our objective. I crossed that on the back of a tank.

MZ: So what else do you recall about the Bulge?

MB: That's about cold, cold, cold. The answer is one word, cold. And the fact is we held. We paid a hell of a price. But that part was important because it gave Patton a chance to come up behind us. That's what I remember, bitter cold, hungry, if you want to take a chance and go back to where the kitchen was set up you're taking your life in your hands. So most people just stayed put.

MZ: Why do you say they were taking their lives in their hands to go back and get some food?

MB: Because any time the kitchen would rattle they'd throw shells. Kitchen makes noise when they come.

BB: The Germans would do that? They would start shooting bombs at you?

MB: The thing was our airplanes couldn't fly. It was a foggy, cold, freezing weather and so the German tanks had pretty much control. December, about the 18th the sky cleared and the German tanks had retreated. They broke the tank line, which gave us a break to hold what we had. So weather -- the Germans are very shrewd people. They used weather very much to their advantage. We were cold. So we just held it. Like I said, I got wounded so I went back to -- it was just a barn. They had four tables set up and some gas tanks there. And that's where I went back. They never ran a patched through arm, I just held it like -- when I got back there the doctors were dead on their feet. The doctor had four tables laid there where the operator and guys were in bad shape, a lot of them. A lot of them were dead.

But the aid station, I walked in and they had them piled up like cord wood. Dead guys. And I went in there and he says, "Sarge, you've got to put that arm up. You can't let

it hang on like that. That's the worst pain I ever knew, I guess. When I took that arm after a day holding it there. The muscles. Man, if I could have hit him I would have hit him. But I went there and the first aid station was just a shack. And they said, "Sarge, ain't no room for you in the ambulance. They're loading the ambulance." The Army chaplain was up there. What the hell he was doing there -- I don't know, but there was a Army chaplain. Fed me a half a -- piece of a -- I always remember it was the best tasting egg and ham you ever tasted in your life. Just a little wedge. But he got me and he said, "I'm going to --" the next town was Liège, Belgium. (inaudible) But he said, "I'm going to Liège." He said, "You can ride with me in the Jeep." He had a driver the chaplain. I got in the Jeep and the ambulance went a half a block and took a direct hit. Nobody left. So when they do that day after day, after a while you get numb. Nothing I seen towards the end of the war, and even know when you go to a funeral. I asked a nurse from the church, I said, "Is it possible to lose all your emotions?" And she said, "Yes, I think your brain will shut them off." And I think the war did that to me.

BB: After what you saw.

MB: Nothing, like I said, after seeing all those guys piled up and blown to pieces. Blitzler, my best buddy took a direct hit with an 88 right in the chest. There wasn't enough left of him to put in a basket. After so much of that -- I don't know.

MZ: Do you remember when your unit was relieved?

MB: On the front?

MZ: Yeah, at the Battle of the Bulge. Or do you remember when it was relieved?

MB: Never was. It went on forward to the Rhine River. From the [Ruhr?] to the Rhine. Moved and went across. The towns were [Schmitt?] and -- the town that we were trying to take off on, [Kreuzau?], was no man's land. We'd take it at day time, they'd knock us out at night. Back and forth. And I was gone this time. I was in the hospital, away in England. First time I got in an airplane, C47. (laughter) Cross the Channel.

MZ: At any time did you go through the Hürtgen Forest?

MB: That's where we were. That was the Bulge, in the Hürtgen Forest. Right out of it. We went out of it into the -- and then after they crossed the Rhine we went into Ruhr Valley, the industrial valley in Germany. Went north and Patton went towards Austria.

MZ: So as your unit moves on and you head back to England to a hospital. How long were you there?

MB: Four days. In time to come back and rejoin the outfit. I crossed the Channel three times. Twice by boat and once by airplane.

MZ: What did you think of the medical care?

MB: Terrific. Considering the -- I had one comment that has stayed with me. We were outside Liège, Belgium in a hospital tent. The hospitals were swamped, they couldn't begin to put wounded GIs in the hospitals. They were full with really serious people. And I could walk, so that put me at walking wounded. And we went in this tent and a German tiger had slipped through the lines somewhere and got close to Liège and shelled that hospital tent. Everything was in shreds. The guys there all had the blankets rolled up to their knees because of frozen feet. I told the doctor, I said, "Leave mine alone." (laughter) But I paid the price for it because my feet gave me trouble all my life. But there was a nurse, a middle aged lady I'd said and the guys were all diving under their cots and I was laying on mine. I said, "Lady, what the hell you doing here?" I'll never forget. She said, "This is where I belong." What an answer. Classic! In the middle of -- no reason for her, nothing she could do. But she was there to

help the guys. Give them courage, I guess. And I never forget her answer. Not quick, in a casual voice. "This is where I belong." It's been 70 years and I never forgot it.

BB: You have a good memory.

MZ: You do.

MB: Well I have Alzheimer's. (laughter)

MZ: So the 78th is still heading east. Do you guys go across the bridge at Remagen?

MB: No, they knocked that in before we got there. My division was one of the first ones to cross the Rhine. Patton was north of us, he also crossed the Rhine. But we -- the bridge's name was Ludendorff, have you heard of that?

MZ: Ludendorff Bridge?

MB: And it was at the town of Remagen. So many times people would conflict the two as one place. It was two. And all it was was a railroad bridge. Hitler had decided to make a sand -- because the banks of the Rhine were almost straight up and down. And the airplane knocked the rest of that bridge in, a German airplane. But it was set to blow. I never knew until after the war, Reader's Digest. A tank shell cut that cable or they would have blew the whole bridge up. We had a pontoon, I crossed on a pontoon next to it. It was just a railroad bridge, the Army laid planks on each side of the rail so they could drive it. That's

how they got across. But it was only brief because you had to go on the other one. And across the Rhine was the -- I think it almost looked like they dug a ditch, a real steep. The only way up, walking up there you walked over a dead GI or a dead German. They knew we had to come and we got there. But up on top was a little airfield. They had aircrafts set up there and I walked up there and I looked up and I see a lady sitting in the aircraft, deader than a doornail. German lady. That's when I realized they had women in the service too.

MZ: Was she in some kind of uniform or something?

MB: Hmm?

MZ: Was she in some kind of uniform?

MB: I don't even remember, I didn't look that close. If she had a uniform it was just a drab Army -- she didn't have anything that would catch your eye. Except her hair. Blonde haired girl sitting there. Trying to protect the bridge. And then we swung north and that's when we went up to -- we wound up at Essen. Essen, E-S-S-E-N. That's where the German commander had his men on the street waiting for us as we came. Surrendered the bunch as a unit. Because the war was over. But the town before Essen was Wuppertal, that's where I got my -- when I get home I got the book and I'll write names. Wuppertal was the name

of the town, I don't know how you spell it. Two p's in it, I know that.

MZ: You know I think I've seen it but I didn't write it down. But it's in Germany? OK.

MB: Essen is in Germany too. Closer to Berlin.

MZ: Did you ever have any guard duty, any prisoners or any chance to -- I know you're not going to strike up a conversation with them, but do you have any --

MB: Not until after the war -- on occupation. During the war we never -- how can you say -- you're fighting, you're not there to converse. He smiles crooked you'll probably shoot him. You become almost an animal, does that make sense?

MZ: Yes it does. So where did you go after Wuppertal?

MB: Then we went to Essen. Up there is where -- you've heard of the Sig River, Sig Canal? They called it Sig River, more than Canal. That's where we got orders to hold it. They promised Russia could take Berlin. So we sat up at the Sig River for a week there, waiting to get the OK. That's where we met the Russians. They gave them permission. It cost Russia a price to take Berlin. But they all thought -- Roosevelt and Churchill and them, they all decided to give Russia that because of what they did. That wasn't popular with us because we wanted to get it over and get home. So that's where the 78th set up there.

The war ended and then we went in the occupation and went by truck to Berlin. We relieved the 82nd Airborne in Berlin.

MZ: What was it like when you saw the Russians the first time?

MB: I didn't see them. No, we weren't there. When they say they met them, probably two generals met them. Russians -- they told us in Berlin never go out alone, because you won't come back. Russia had a sector, we had a sector, England had a sector. But before we went to Berlin to relieve the Airborne, we went to a town -- what was the name of it? Arolsen. And we're there as the occupation. Dornburg was the little berg that we stayed a lot in. They were German towns that we actually -- we just lived. We came in that night and it was raining, miserable cold. We just went to a big house and told the Germans you've got 15 minutes to get out. We've got to use this. We would clean out blocks like that. And that's where we would set up headquarters. The first thing is that we would set up a tavern room. So we could get beer. They didn't like those sweet German beers, so the GIs -- (laughter)

MZ: What was the name of the town again?

MB: Dornburg, Arolsen. Castle, all towns were in the circumference. And we were there quite a while. And then the 82nd Airborne -- here's something that -- did you know

you could only cash in three months' pay when you went home? See that stuff don't get around. That's the stuff - - the 82nd Airborne sent home a million more of their entire payroll the first month they were in Berlin through the black market. We came in behind them and the Army, after the horse is gone, they always shut two doors instead of one when it gets away. All they would cash in for anybody was three months' back pay. No matter how much money you had. I had a fistful of German marks. And three months' back pay they would cash in the rest. The rest you played poker with. I bought my wife a dozen yellow roses. Sent it from Berlin. Money wasn't going anywhere.

BB: Well you said you could only take so much. You could only take so much with you.

MB: Yeah, but I was there for six months! So you're giving them three months' free -- I gave the US Army three months' free service.

MZ: I've never heard of that before.

MB: Not much, you don't hear that kind of stuff. But the 82nd Airborne was the one that set it up with their stupid -- they would sell a guy a Jeep and then take it away from him on the next block. And the reasoning behind this -- I don't know if this should be out here or not -- but they would -- say Russia, the Army went to Berlin and they took

Berlin and when you went to go home, the Russians had, just like we did, invasion marks and stuff. And when he went to Russia that stuff was no good as ours. Anything that you had, Russia was going home and you had six months in the Army pay on them, and you had a watch, you'd get what was in his pocket because the money was worthless. As was ours. So they'd sell a watch -- it wasn't all crookedness, it was -- and then they decide to go home and safety bond. I'm letting secrets out of the bag here!

MZ: Oh no, that's OK. We like secrets.

MB: But that was most of the reasoning why they had so much money to send home. The separation system was what we should call it I guess. After the war. I've seen poker games with money piled a foot high. Wasn't worth it, couldn't even use it for the toilet because it was too stiff.

MZ: And these were all invasion marks, you said? What did you call them again?

MB: What?

MZ: What did you call the money?

MB: Crap. Scrip is what we called it.

MZ: Do you remember where you were when you heard that Hitler was dead?

MB: None of us believed it because he was so good at brainwashing people and stuff and having doubles. I don't think I ever did believe it, even when I came home. I don't mean that smart, it just never sunk in. I figured he had a double somewhere. He was known for that -- Germans were known for it. We tried to find him down in South America, we had a hell of a time. Trying to find the Germans after the war.

MZ: They still talk about it today. You hear the stories about, "Oh, the U-boats snuck him out."

MB: And a lot of it was true. U-boats were on our coast, the East Coast. I don't know if I'm making sense here or not. It's been a long time.

MZ: No, that's fine. What about when the war ended? Do you know what you were doing when the war ended in Europe, at least?

MB: Yeah, I guess we were sitting up on the Sig River I think. We were occupation so there was a lot of free booze, you know.

MZ: Really?

MB: I remember in Arolsen, the first sergeant come to me in the morning and said, "Brandy you better get the guys up. We're getting ready to go to Japan. We're going to start training again. We've got to stand Reveille." We never

did it, we never -- I told him, "Hell, ain't nobody went to bed yet." It was broad daylight but under a bank they found a whole bunch of gin from Holland, and wine, and big baskets, big as -- that winded around. Nothing else would do. The hard part was to keep from getting into fights when they'd been drinking. So we had a lot of booze but we ran it with iron fists. Had to.

MZ: What else did you do during occupation? I imagine there was guard duty, but --

MB: We didn't even guard, we didn't do a heck of a lot. We used to play baseball, softball. We had a team, we played that. And a little bit of get together once in a while. We'd close order drill for half an hour. We were supposed to be going to small business school, you know. That or a day sleeping under a tree. (laughter) So theoretically we were busy, but everybody was pretty much on their own.

MZ: Since the war's over and there's occupation duty it doesn't seem like there's a lot --

MB: Well occupation -- Sergeant! They took the officers and put them in some kind of Jeep. But we had the whole town! 30 guys! And I'm the sergeant, the only one, just because I was the oldest in the company. We had guys coming to me and I had to tell a second lieutenant off, because he was goofing off. Sergeant! You see that, organized confusion.

MZ: Did a lot of soldiers getting in trouble for doing things? Drinking too much? Fights, things like that? Because it doesn't sound like there's a lot to do during occupation duty.

MB: There isn't. But like I said, they would play ball. They watched us pretty carefully that way as far as -- like I said they would have an officer come around check every once in a while. I'll tell you one kind of funny thing. Lieutenant Barton was a Johnny Come Late, 90 day wonder, an officer we got -- I think you remember -- I can't tell you. Who's the guy from St. Louis, Missouri that we stop and have dinner with every once in a while? Anyway, he was a PFC and they had a radio which had short wave in their barrack. Each group of men had their own house. So you could walk around there. And us in the main row in headquarters, we had a whole house. I wish I could think of his name. But anyway, he had this radio and let's do it and pick up short wave. Really he knew more about what was going on. Well then comes Buzz Barton, you know, the lieutenant. And then I'm sitting in the house one day and he come in and boy, he was storming mad. And I said, "What's the matter?" And he said, "Brandy, you've got to come along. That dang lieutenant wants my radio." I said, "What?" He had found the radio, Barton wanted it now.

Went down there and there's this brand new lieutenant. I said, "What the hell you doing?" He said, "I think the guy should give me that radio. I want to listen to short wave." And I can't use the language here, but I told him you could get out and find one. And he turned around, kind of tail between his legs and took off. And that's the kind of what you had with the older men. No way a sergeant should be telling a lieutenant off. But there's time where it has to be. So I got the guy's radio. When can I stop to say that we're not just -- well anyway, that's some funny things that happened sometimes.

MZ: How many points did you have at this point?

MB: I don't even know. I had enough to go home a couple time and was classed essential to go to Berlin. That's another one of nice Army tricks, you know? Government tricks without drinking or boating, putting in the Army. All I was saying was don't put them in the Army. There's nothing wrong with the other part. But watch the age, then. Which they did, they lowered it down to 18.

MZ: Did you write a lot of letters during the time of your service?

MB: Did I get a lot?

MZ: Did you get a lot? Did you write a lot?

MB: My wife wrote very -- I didn't write a lot. When I went to England I got it all dumped on my desk because they couldn't get in contact with us. How are they going to get mail to you? Nobody came through to a foxhole and handed me a letter. (laughter)

MZ: Right, that would be extreme mail service. So when did you finally go home?

MB: January 10th, 1946. Went in September 10th, 1942.

MZ: And how'd you get home?

MB: Train.

MZ: Well from Europe, when you heard that you were going home.

MB: I was in the -- the 26th division was going home as a division. So I got transferred to the 26th. I went from Berlin to Bremerhaven, the German port. They put me with another bunch of guys that was -- put us with the 29th just to get us to the States. Then from the States I went to Camp Kilmer right where I went in and back to my paper mill.

MZ: Do you remember who, let's say, your company commander was?

MB: Captain Jones.

MZ: Captain Jones. What kind of guy was he?

MB: Very much -- I picture him sitting on a tank coming around the corner in Rubbertals. He was very much a -- our company commander got killed. One of them got killed, the

other got wounded. Captain Sharp, who was the one from the States, he got shot high through the shoulder. And he came back but never back to the company. He died a couple years ago. Captain Jones was the main one. We had a couple of different -- Bone, a sniper got him sitting in a Jeep.

MZ: It happens, I guess. You left the service as a staff sergeant?

MB: I left the service as a staff sergeant. Went in as private.

MZ: Is there anything else that you might want to share? I'm just about out of questions.

MB: I'm all out of talking. I don't normally talk this much. No. I would just say the veteran's organization has treated me well. I have no complaints. Which is unusual because GIs have a second nature of griping. (laughter)

MZ: Oh, do you remember what you were doing when you heard that the atomic bomb had been dropped?

MB: Well, we didn't know how to take it. You know we killed more people with our stick bombing 29s than the atomic bomb. We knew that von Braun, who was the rocket man, we seen the first rockets in France by the way, B1 and B2. And he was a German head of their space program and we captured him and he became the head of ours. He didn't go to prison like the other prisoners. Politics. And Russia

captured a lot. At that point when you're asking me, we were trying to capture as many knowledgeable German people as we could. Rather than let the Russians get them.

MZ: Right, it was probably a smart thing to do. When were you guys told that you were not going to be going to fight the Japanese?

MB: When the war was over. Not before. We knew we were training. And of course, especially the guys who had been through a lot of it didn't have a lot of heart for going in the islands, the Japanese. I still feel for, especially our Vietnam people, the way they treated them, this country when they came home. People forget they sent them over there. Then when they come home they spit on them. On the epitaph on my grave I want it to say, "He didn't know."
(laughter)

MZ: Well. Oh, did you use the GI Bill at all when you got home?

MB: No, I had a job and somebody told me and I had sense enough to listen, to get out of work staff the union. I was a union worker, actually I was a steward in our division. And they said, "Mel, you're not enlisting, get on it." And I did. Didn't cost me a penny. When I come home I had three and half years' more seniority on my pension. Which I've been getting for 28 years now. Don't sound like much,

but over 28 years is a pretty good -- and for my arm I got six dollars and 10 cents a month. And it made me a disabled veteran. Which I have the -- I'll show you. So in that way, I have no complaint. I've got a bunch of junk there.

MZ: Do you still get six dollars a month?

MB: It's a hundred now.

MZ: OK, I was hoping it would be --

MB: Yeah, but that was the original. Beer money.

MZ: Beer money. (laughter)

MB: Here's the original.

MZ: Veterans of the Battle of the Bulge. I noticed the cap says Minnesota, is that --

MB: Yeah. My other son is a minister and he right now --

MZ: OK, so you're with Post 1403. Oh, F Company?

MB: Yeah, and this is the key to everything. I went to the hospital and they told me, "Bring all your records, medicine records and everything." When I went from South Carolina, the capital, to Minnesota. So I did, I picked up whatever I thought I could find. And I went in there and he said, "Do you have that card?" And I said, "Yeah." He took this card in Minnesota, punched it in, and got all the medical. Isn't that amazing?

MZ: They can call it up so quickly these days.

MB: Everything was there. I didn't have to -- well I've got quite a list of cards here.

MZ: Well I think that pretty much covers all my questions.

MB: Here's the old division. It's no more a division. They made a brigade. They're making brigades out of everything, which are lighter, more efficient. But this is the old 78th. It's the one here with the lightning. This is a Minnesota, this one. Disabled, there's the one I was looking for. So, hope I answered your questions.

MZ: Yes you did.

MB: I'm not the world's greatest guy to --

MZ: No, your memory serves. It's pretty good. And I just have some paperwork to sign and then I got paperwork to do tonight.

BB: So you're busy.

MZ: Yes. Well, on behalf of the museum and myself, thank you for your service.

MB: Wasn't my choice!

MZ: OK.

END OF AUDIO FILE