

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH JOHN W. BROWN, JR.

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES OF WORLD WAR II

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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TRANSCRIPT BY

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Kevin Bing: This begins an interview with John W. Brown, Jr. on the 14th of May, 2004 in New Brunswick, New Jersey with Kevin Bing,

Mark Segaloff: Mark Segaloff,

Nicolas Molnar: Nicolas Molnar.

KB: First of all, Mr. Brown, we'd like to thank you for joining us today and thank you for telling us your story.

John Brown: My pleasure, Kevin.

KB: What we usually start with is having you talk about your parents, about where they were born and how they met?

JB: I wish you could have known my father. He was a fine, fine person throughout his lifetime. He was born in 1899, just before the turn of the century in Rumford Falls, Maine. One of those, lumber towns in Upper Maine, and why there? Because the Brown family had moved there from Canada, so my grandfather could become superintendent in charge of building a large paper mill for the US government. It turned out to be the largest paper mill in the world for a single purpose and that was to make cardstock for postcards, for the Post Office Department. Later on, my grandfather's health failed and the doctors said, "You must get out of this harsh climate in Maine, or you won't live much longer." So it was about his retirement time, in any case, and so, he said to the family, "I'm going to find us a warmer place to live." As the story goes, he traveled by train all the way to Florida. He had in mind buying an orange grove in Florida but when he reported back to my grandmother she said, "It's going to be too hot down there." He happened to write his letter, reporting the orange grove proposition, when he was in Wilmington, Delaware, staying at the Hotel Dupont, and so to make that long story short, he checked around Delaware and located a farm for sale near the little town of Camden-Wyoming. That's where the family settled down and where my dad grew up. He was Class of 1918 at Ceasar Rodney High School, and he then matriculated at the University of Delaware. By this time, the US was at war with Germany having joined the Allies in 1917. As he went on campus, he was recruited into the SATC, Student Army Training Corps, which was a predecessor to the ROTC as we know it ... Here he was a freshman at the University of Delaware in uniform as a private, and attending his first year at the university. Suddenly, the war was over in November of 1918 and they were mustered out, so, he had only been on Army duty for a few months, but this gave him a right to wear the World War I Campaign Ribbon. While finishing his undergraduate studies at the University of Delaware my father met and married my mother, Harriet Isabel Hutchison, from the nearby town of Smyrna, Delaware. Her family had been "Delawareans" from way back. I was born in Wilmington, Delaware at the Wilmington General Hospital. My father's family had moved to Wilmington, having sold the farm after my grandfather's death. After graduation my father accepted a position as a high school teacher in Freeland, Pennsylvania. He did fine, but my mother and I, only a few months old, did not like the cold, raw climate, so my father obtained a post as an English teacher at Wildwood High School in New Jersey and off our little family went to the Jersey Shore, and that's where we stayed until World War II.

KB: Growing up in Wildwood, you grew up into the Depression, did you see the effects on Wildwood and how did it affect your family?

JB: Having been born in 1922, my early recollections were of “the roaring twenties.” For example, I was five years old when Lindberg flew across the Atlantic, and one of my earliest recollections was holding my Aunt Hilda’s hand and hearing her say, “Jackie, look up, that’s Lindberg in his airplane.” You may know that Lindberg, when he came back from the Paris flight, flew to everyone of the forty-eight states. Isn’t that interesting? He gave everybody in the country a chance to see him in action. I thought that was a tremendous bit of history. As a little kid I well remember “the roaring twenties.” Sports wise, we had Jack Dempsey and Gene Tunney fighting it out to be the heavyweight champion of the world; Bill Tilton in tennis, with his famous cannonball serve; and, of course, in baseball, Babe Ruth was the darling of the whole country. In football, Red Grange was the big thing. “The Galloping Ghost,” from Illinois, and then “The Four Horsemen of Notre Dame.” What was it up at Fordham? “The Seven Blocks of Granite,” one of which was Vince Lombardi. Even as little kids we were in the sports of “the roaring twenties.” And even as little kids, we were aware that there were gangsters, and particularly at the Jersey Shore, that there were rum runners. The boat loads of good scotch whiskey would be lying offshore and the fast boats of the bootleggers would zip out, bring in a load, hoping to stay ahead of the clutches of the Coast Guard, who they could usually outrun because they had Chris Crafts.

KB: It’s our job.

JB: Even as little kids, we were aware of the stock market crash, that infamous day in October of 1929. We began to hear stories of people who were jumping out of windows as they lost their savings, as the stocks tumbled from high to low levels, and people began to go bankrupt and things like that. The building boom ended at the Shore, particularly from Atlantic City south. What are the big suburbs in Atlantic City? Margate, Ventner, Absecon. Suddenly, it wasn’t a big heyday anymore, and where people would flock to the shore: Ocean City, Avalon, Stone Harbor, Cape May, Wildwood. Suddenly, people couldn’t afford even a dollar. They come down on the railroad on a one day excursion from Philadelphia. Then, as we got into the early ‘30s, it got worse. What did President Roosevelt say when he came into power? “I see a country one third ill-clothed, ill-housed, ill-fed.” Unemployment reached into the high twenties, if not the thirties; thirty percent of all the people had no work. It hit everybody. Our family was lucky, because my dad was a school teacher, but then, Wildwood, among other shore resorts, ran out of money, because nobody could pay their taxes, and so, they paid the teachers with a technique called “script,” kind of an IOU, like play money; non-interest-bearing notes that said, “We owe you \$100.00 and we’ll pay off this piece of paper whenever we get it,” and these traded just like money. The stores would accept them, so we had money but it wasn’t real money. It was a very interesting technique.

MS: And it worked?

KB: As far as your father being an educator, did it seem to affect, besides salary, the school system, maybe the quality of education? Both you, as a student, and your father, as an educator, maybe that was discussed around the dining room table?

JB: I don't have any feel that the Depression downgraded education at all, except, that we were very careful with things like our books. I guess, we would have been hung from a telephone pole if any kid had defaced a book and, at the end of a term, we very carefully erased every mark in the book so that it could be passed along. Did they do that in your time?

MS: In elementary school, but in elementary school we used to get fined.

JB: But there were no frills at all. We also walked home for lunch, and there were no salary increases for a long, long time, all through the '30s. But I don't think it hurt education that much. It was a privilege to be in school and people made sure their kids went to school, and did it and did it right.

KB: When talking about the Depression, did you see any positive impact with some of the New Deal programs? Were you involved in the National Youth Administration or anything like that or was that even discussed? Was that something you were aware of?

JB: You mentioned what we called the NYA; isn't that interesting that you have a handle on that? That helped a lot of students. As a matter-of-fact, when I came to Rutgers, I worked over in the library as a freshman in an NYA program and was happy to get those extra bucks. I made more money when I parked cars at the football games but, the NYA did help, there's no doubt about it, and a lot of those other programs of the New Deal era. There were all kinds of self help programs, as people helped others, clothing was passed along through families and Salvation Army posts and things like that. There was a lot of feeling that we were all in this terrible thing together and we have to help each other.

KB: How would you describe your neighborhood in Wildwood and what growing up in Wildwood was like?

JB: It was unique, in the sense that being a seashore resort we went through the yearly cycles. In the summer time people from the "city," we used to call it, Philadelphia primarily, would come down and rent homes, or had cottages there, and there was a lot of hustle and bustle because of great numbers of people. We always said that we hated the Philadelphia drivers because they drove so fast up and down the Shore streets without care. Then, of course, in the winter time the seashore resorts shrunk way back. Winter population in Wildwood was five thousand five hundred, and would boom up to fifty to one hundred thousand, but we were ready to absorb that kind of ups and downs, and happy for it, because it gave work to all. We worked all summer long to get money for college. Where did you work in the summertime?

MS: At Jenkinson's and I worked at The Sawmill, which is a bar, I'm a bouncer there.

JB: My brother was a lifeguard for years. That was a great summer job.

MS: All my friends and I, grew up working in the Shore community in the summertime.

JB: Why don't you ask me what I did in the summertime?

KB: What did you do?

JB: I was a milkman, because where one milkman could handle say twenty streets in the winter time, in the summer time it took maybe five milkmen to cover that same territory, so the Philadelphia dairies always hired a bunch of locals to do the summer work. Some of the fellows carried mail in the summer time. We had full employment in the summertime and were happy for it.

MS: Especially in the Depression.

JB: Yes.

KB: Moving on to Rutgers, or your decision to go to Rutgers; what made you decide to come to Rutgers?

JB: When my time came to move along from high school, I applied to several schools, including Rutgers. Rutgers, at that time, had an entrance exam and a scholarship program and a group of us drove up to Atlantic City, which was the nearest place where they held the exam, and I ended up winning a State Scholarship.

NM: Did you always plan to go to college? Was it always on your mind to go to college?

JB: Yes, it was. Our family background is primarily Scottish, and the Scots make a fetish out of education. My great grandfather played a major role in establishing the University of New Brunswick, up in Canada. He first came in to North America, from Scotland, into Canada, and at one point in his career, they asked him to join a commission and decide on a university for New Brunswick, Canada, and he played a role in getting that established.

MS: In your family everyone went to college?

JB: Yes. It was a tradition from way back.

NM: Did you feel that your education at Wildwood had prepared you for college? Was it a good preparation? I mean, because you scored so high in the entrance examination.

JB: Well, when you go to high school and your father is the principal, you better shape up, not that there was a whip hanging there, but it was just expected. My mother, I guess, said, "What do you mean you haven't finished your theme? You get back in your room and do it." So it never occurred to my brother and I not to be good students and, unhappily, most of my high school teachers had known me since I was a little kid, like my Latin teacher, who still called me Jackie in class, so it was a foregone conclusion that we'd have pretty good grades.

KB: So you came to Rutgers, your freshman year was 1940. There's a lot happening in the world and there's a lot happening on the campus then. Could you talk about what life was like for a freshman in 1940?

JB: All right. Let me go back to 1939 as a springboard into that. [In the] Summer of 1939, my brother and I had found a great way to make money in the summer was through newspapers, so he and I had the exclusive rights for certain parts of Wildwood Crest to serve newspapers. The Philadelphia papers, *Inquirer*, *Record*, and so forth, and what we called the foreign papers, *New York Times*, *Baltimore Sun*, papers like that, and that was awfully good money in those days. We would serve our papers in the morning, and we had the evening papers. Sunday papers were a pain, but you made more money doing that, and I'll never forget, we all knew that there was trouble in Europe, of course, but then, suddenly, September 1, 1939, when Germany invaded Poland, and the newspapers kept coming with new and newer editions of the war news. So it was so apparent in my mind, and my brother's mind, there's a war on in Europe. We'd known about the Japanese invading China in the '30s, and the rape of Nanking and all the atrocities of the Japanese, and so forth. Had the Japanese taken Singapore by that time, I don't remember? So we were very much aware of the European war at the senior year in high school, and on to Rutgers in September 1940.

KB: Just to interrupt, was that something that then you felt you're preparing for or was this something that you viewed as simply in Europe? Did you anticipate the United States becoming involved?

JB: No, because our President Roosevelt, of course, had said, "We're not going to send our boys to foreign shores," and every mother in America was comforted with that. We all thought that, "It's not our war, we tried to help in World War I but it's their problem over there." So it seemed remote, I guess.

KB: As you were coming on the campus, this was the backdrop?

JB: Yes, it was not the burning issue at all.

KB: So then what were your burning issues as a freshman in college at Rutgers?

JB: Just to get going, at that next level of our lives, and I'm sure, as you fellows were, it was time to leave the family hearth and get out from under. Everybody I knew in September 1940, running around with the freshman cap on. We were glad to be here. Homesick? We didn't know what the word was. Rutgers was great. Do you still have that CT down the street here, Corner Tavern, does it still exist?

KB: It does, indeed.

JB: Incredible. They threatened to shut that up.

KB: There are mugs of individuals that we've actually interviewed, mostly from the Class of '41, and they're all hanging with their names on them, still. So it's got a lot of tradition from your years.

JB: Oh, that's incredible. So we just thought it was great to be at Rutgers. I went out for cross country and started running down at Buccleuch Park. My buddy, Cran Clark [RC '44], was on the freshman football team and we both won our numerals, and that was a big deal. Do they still do that? We had "1944" on our sweaters.

MS: No.

JB: They don't do that anymore? They don't issue freshman numerals?

KB: What were some of the freshman rituals? I understand that was a big part of Rutgers history at that time, the posters from the sophomore class, can you tell us about that?

JB: Yes, there was a lot of harmless hazing. The real hazing was in the fraternity houses, and if you want to talk about that we'll cut off the tape. We all had to wear beanies, which we did, and if an upperclassman whistled at you, you had to break into a trot, and good-naturedly, we all did, even the big guys that had come to play football trotted. Nobody said, "You can't make me trot." There was a great rivalry with the sophomores already on campus. We had all kinds of things, like a tug-of-war, to see if you could pull the sophomores into the mud, that was a big deal, but, I guess, other than that, that's what I would mean by tradition and hazing.

NM: I also understand you were part of the fraternity on campus, Theta Chi? Can you tell us about that experience?

JB: The fraternity? Yes, in my case, being a Theta Chi was almost a foregone conclusion. Although my dad didn't say, "You must." He had been a Theta Chi at the University of Delaware. So, although I had been invited to several houses, I very quickly said, "Theta Chi," and got accepted as a pledge, although I started life out in the Quad, do you still call it that, Hegeman Hall?

KB: I live in Pell.

JB: Do you, you were in Pell? Oh, for heaven's sake. Hegeman lives on then.

KB: I lived there last year.

JB: Oh, for heaven's sake. I'll never forget the time someone from Long Island poured lighter fluid under the door of a student from Vineland and lit it! Those doors are still metal, aren't they?

KB: Oh, no, they're wood now. I think they're wood, yes.

JB: But he poured and lit it and, of course, it was harmless, really, but for the moment the burning lighter fluid flared with this big hulky guy inside. The door had been roped shut, so here's the poor devil in there screaming. It was a third floor room so he couldn't jump out, but, of course, the lighter fluid burned out very quickly. I'm quite sure it was a metal door, at least,

in those days. What made me bring that up? I soon moved over to the Theta Chi house. I enjoyed fraternity life immensely.

[Tape Paused]

KB: We were talking about moving into Theta Chi.

JB: Yes. I'd like to flash back for just a moment. One event transpired while I was still a senior in high school about Rutgers. I had been invited to come up to prep school weekend. Do you still have it?

KB: We have an open house, yes.

JB: So up I came for what was called prep school weekend and, it's still fresh in my mind. It was a fabulous experience for a high school kid. I was staying over at the Lambda Chi house. I saw my first lacrosse game, for example. The whole weekend was just great. I said, "What a fabulous place." I think if there had been no scholarship offered at all, I would have wanted to come to Rutgers, because I did visit some other campuses, but that prep school weekend did it. If you ever need a recruiting technique you'll never beat inviting high school people.

MS: They have a recruiting weekend. So yes, we did come out. We go to basketball games and we do a lot of things that seems like you described, so it's very similar, not much has changed.

KB: So you enjoyed that and then . . .

JB: All right, I thoroughly enjoyed fraternity house life. It was an obvious social experience and experience in life. When my brother came on campus, a year after I did, he came right on into the house, as a freshman and just thoroughly enjoyed the fraternity house life, also.

KB: What was that like for you having your brother on campus, and so close to you?

JB: We were close age wise, twenty-one months apart, and we'd been buddies our whole life. We even had a common closet of clothes. We were about the same size, but he always claimed I got the best shoes. It was fun having my brother up here with me.

NM: I also understand that you joined ROTC. Could you just tell us about that experience, how you got involved in it?

JB: It was mandatory, as a land grant college, all freshmen and sophomores had to take ROTC, and I took to it immediately. I thoroughly enjoyed it and jumped at the chance to go on into the advanced course. So there was no doubt in my mind that I was going to be a four year ROTC guy. It didn't work out that way, because of the war. Yes, I was very avidly enjoying ROTC.

NM: You were aware of the events in Europe. Now when you joined ROTC did you ever see yourself, "Maybe I could go to Europe?"

JB: No, never thought of it that way. I just thought I would be a commissioned officer in the reserves. I hadn't thought of myself as an active Army person, at the beginning there, as a freshman,

MS: Was your dad in the reserves? I know he was in the Coast Guard in World War II, was he in the Coast Guard Reserves or Naval Auxiliary Unit?

JB: Back into the late '30s, now, and while I'm still in high school, the Coast Guard set up this thing that you just referred to; the Coast Guard Auxiliary and encouraged boatmen, up and down the coast, or wherever there was water, to form these local groups voluntarily, and be kind of an adjunct to the Coast Guard, and my dad got very active in that. As an educator, he ended up writing a series of lesson plans and tests for people coming in off the street, so to speak, into the Auxiliary. The Coast Guard headquarters in Philadelphia seemed to like this so much they said, "Please come on active duty." So my dad took a leave as an educator and became a Coast Guard officer.

MS: He was an officer?

JB: Yes, and that's when the family moved from Wildwood to Haddonfield so he could be at the Coast Guard Headquarters in Philadelphia. So I became aware of that part of military being through my father. My uncle, his older brother, had been a colonel in World War I and another uncle had been a sergeant. My great grandfather had been a colonel in the militia in Canada, what would be our National Guard, so there was that little bit of military background in the family.

NM: Exactly. That's what it seems here in the survey; everyone was involved in the military.

KB: I know your father was in Delaware during World War I, but your uncle, were war stories a part of growing up? Besides being in a traditionally military family, was your family military minded?

JB: I would say not to a serious extent, but we were well aware of my sergeant uncle's World War I experience. He was my mother's favorite brother and my uncle came to visit us quite a bit, and we enjoyed listening to his stories and pictures of him in Paris, and in uniform, and that sort of thing. Another uncle, who had been a colonel, had had quite a war experience, but when the war was over, World War I, he went into business. So we had that kind of military background.

KB: Did that influence your decision to join ROTC or to carry on?

JB: Perhaps a little bit, yes, I would say so.

KB: What would you say your academic life was like at Rutgers and who was your favorite professor? How challenging did you find the curriculum?

JB: Like most college students out of a typical public high school, it was hard. I wasn't ready for college algebra, and college physics and chemistry, I thought, was frightful. Oh, my, you know, suddenly what had been easy at high school wasn't so easy. Did you fellows have this experience?

NM: Oh yes, calculus, oh, gosh.

JB: I foolishly signed up for German as a foreign language. I bailed out of that one. I dropped German, switched to Spanish. I stuck to it as, obviously, you fellows have and, suddenly, you know, it starts to happen.

NM: You were in the School of Business?

JB: Yes.

NM: As undergraduate what were some of your decisions that made you join the school of business? What were your aspirations for your future career?

JB: Actually, I signed on at Rutgers as a chemistry major and it didn't take too long to convince me that was a bad idea. That first semester I was taking chemistry, including a Saturday lab, from eight to twelve, I think.

MS: On Saturday?

JB: Yes, on Saturday, and physics, we're in what was the physics building, oh, that physics was terrible. About the middle of my freshman year, I said, "I'm not cut out to be a chemist." In business administration, [there were] a lot of the guys I knew. I said, "That makes a lot more sense. I always was meant to be a businessman anyway." So I switched into business and just liked economics, and I had no trouble with accounting, and so forth, and it just suddenly fell into place. Suddenly, I was getting all ones.

KB: Despite the academic challenges, it seems that you were really involved on campus. You were in several clubs as you indicated. Can you tell us about some of those?

JB: All right. I'd be happy to. I got on the college newspaper, on the business side of it, and I thoroughly enjoyed that. By the way, as the war came along, the editor was pulled into active service and Rip Watson became managing editor. I was assistant business manager of the *Targum*. Stan Klion got pulled in, and so Rip and I stepped up, one or two years sooner, into running the *Targum* and so by the end of my sophomore year, I was business manager and he was editor-in-chief.

-----END SIDE ONE, TAPE ONE-----

KB: Please continue speaking about your activities at Rutgers.

JB: All right, and *Targum* lives on, I gather. I think it's one of the oldest college newspapers in the country.

MS: I think it is the oldest one.

JB: I got involved in debating, thoroughly enjoyed it, and enjoyed cross country running, but that got to be a problem, those two things. I made the varsity and missed a dual meet. I had a chance to go with the debating team to Annapolis. We were to debate the Midshipmen, and we were going to go down in uniform, and we did. When I came back, the coach said, "Brown, you got to make up your mind. You want to run or talk?" So I stuck to debating and enjoyed that thoroughly. I think, our squad, was early on in doing some radio debates here in New Brunswick. You still have a local radio station in New Brunswick?

KB: Three, two college and one local, New Brunswick, WCTC. You mentioned in your pre-interview survey a professor Reager?

JB: He was the speech professor. He had written a book, published by the Rutgers University Press, called "Speech is Easy" and, I think, it was a nationwide best seller for a while. Professor Reager was just great. I could remember as a freshman he said, "Brown, we've got to do something about that South Jersey accent," (because we drop all of our Gs, "goin" and "comin" and "doin.") He said, "I want to hear those Gs." He was a challenge and a delight, a showman, too. I guess we all liked that about him. I can remember it got to be a tradition that just before a holiday you'd have a farewell from Professor Reager, and he'd have about a five minute speech, "As you young men go off to your holiday, remember the significance of the event." Okay, so I put Reager number one. I had a wonderful chemistry professor, VanMater, where they were beginning to tell us about atoms and things like that. There was no talk about an atom bomb, because I'm sure he didn't know about it, but I can remember him saying, "The potential is enormous."

KB: You knew your wife at that time that you were at Rutgers, correct?

JB: No. I met my wife the night I came home from Europe after World War II.

KB: No, you did not. So, okay, I won't get you in trouble if I ask you what was your interaction with NJC, the women at NJC?

JB: We used to walk over to the Coop. It was a long walk through town to get there. But, yes, we'd make our trips over there. Except, somehow I got to know a girl over in Highland Park whose father was an undertaker and, bless her heart, she would come by the fraternity house and pick me up in a hearse. I guess, she drove her father's hearse sometimes at funerals and, whether he knew it, or not, she came by in her hearse and picked me up. Do they still have mixed parties in the fraternity houses?

KB: Oh, yes.

JB: House party weekends?

KB: Pretty much every weekend is a house party weekend now.

JB: Oh, yes, I should have guessed that.

MS: I have a question about that, did they have a drink of choice? Did they have like kegs of beer that they brought in, or, at house parties, how did it work?

JB: We were big on punches and, ungodly, some of the stuff that was gurgled in. Did you ever hear of Thunderbird, the worst wine that was ever put in a bottle? It seems to me we had a lot of punch, but six packs of beer predominated.

KB: You mentioned the Corner Tavern as well; do you have any stories about the Corner Tavern at all? Basically, what was the function of the Corner Tavern on campus? Was that the meeting place? Tell us about it, please.

JB: It was primarily an escape, you know, you'd have enough of your books and somebody would say, "Let's go down to the CT and have one." There'll always be a group willing to go. There was never any thought that anybody was underage; as long as you can put your money out on the bar you could be served, and we drank terrible things like rum and coke.

KB: Moving on to more serious subjects and moving into the war perhaps, where were you on December 7th?

JB: Right across [Voorhees Mall] at the old library. I was working that Sunday in the library. I'd picked up the job through the NYA. They let me work so many hours a week, and I was over there on duty, on the reserve desk, that Sunday afternoon. We had an assistant librarian over there named Mrs. Campbell, she was always going, "Shhhhhhh." It was a very quiet library, and, suddenly, there was a murmur of voices and I said, "What's going on out there?" And somebody said, "The Japs have just bombed Pearl Harbor." That's how I found out about it.

KB: How did you feel?

JB: Shocked. Then, at noon the next day, we're all having lunch in the fraternity house, with the radio on, when the president gave that famous speech, "the day that will live in infamy," and war was declared. We all listened and everybody was sobered, because it was quite obvious we were all of an age. One of the seniors, Bob Olsen I think it was, said, "Hey, they'll be getting all the reserve officers pretty quick," and they did. They began to leave the campus almost immediately.

MS: The military came in and took the senior ROTC members immediately, or . . .

JB: Not that day, or anything, but over the next weeks and months.

NM: Did you see the Japanese as a threat? Like you see the Germans in Europe, did you ever see the Japanese as a threat in the Pacific? Did you ever suspect them?

JB: Well, we were much aware of what the Japanese had been doing in what they called the “Southeast Asia Sphere of Influence,” that they’d overrun Manchuria, and set up in China a puppet country and, somehow, we knew that they had been in Korea since 1902. We were well aware that the Japs had taken over places like Hong Kong and Singapore.

JB: I guess, my personal awareness was that seeing newsreels of the Japanese bombing Chinese cities, I guess, that was the level of awareness, and thought no more farther than that. There was no hue and cry that the Japanese are a threat to the USA, or anything like that.

NM: When the United States declared war on Japan and Germany, who did you want to focus on, personally, was it just the Japanese because we were attacked by the Japanese?

JB: Yes. We suddenly said, “Oh, the Japanese.” I think we were kind of shocked, when the next day we find that Hitler declared war on the USA, and Italy chimed in after that, but Pearl Harbor time, that Sunday and Monday, our focus was totally on Japan. The European war still seemed to be not our business at all. We were well aware of it, of course, but the bombing of Hawaii; there was no doubt in our minds the Japanese are an enemy now.

KB: Did Pearl Harbor change the way ROTC was? Did it become more focused, did it become more serious, or was your regimen changed in any way?

JB: I guess, maybe, everybody that was taking ROTC took it more seriously. But I don’t remember in the classroom, the officers who were our professors changed anything, except, perhaps almost immediately we got more “hands on” training. Suddenly, we had machine gun training in the gym. We even reached the point where we all had to jump off the diving board in the pool and swim, as if the water was burning oil, as a way to escape. If you couldn’t swim, I think, it became mandatory; you had to learn to swim because we’ve all seen newsreels of and it became knowledgeable that if you jumped off a burning ship, you better get out from underneath the burning oil by swimming under water.

MS: Your father was in the Coast Guard Auxiliary at that time, was he called into service immediately after Pearl Harbor?

JB: He got a leave of absence from his duties as Principal at Wildwood High School and, immediately, went to Philadelphia on duty at Coast Guard Headquarters, 4th Naval District, and the auxiliary ramped up.

NM: What was his capacity in the Coast Guard? Was he an administrator?

JB: He was in charge of all of the Coast Guard Auxiliaries on the Atlantic Coast of New Jersey and inland waterways in Pennsylvania.

JB: Cape May to Sandy Hook. Of course, there'd be one Coast Guard Auxiliary unit in each town or city, one in Cape May, one in Ocean City, one in Avalon, one in Stone Harbor, and so forth, and beach patrols, you're right, that's when the beach dogs came in, and horses.

NM: Really?

JB: Yes. Not the Auxiliary people, but the regular Coast Guards were maintaining horse patrols up and down the beaches of New Jersey.

KB: This was largely due to the fear of German spies coming ashore?

JB: Exactly.

NM: Were there any rumors, or anything like that that, your father talked about or you knew of?

JB: Yes, as a matter-of-fact, they did get one rubber boat load of Germans, as the Coast Guardsman heard, and then saw them coming, and, bless his heart, he captured six of them. It wasn't at Wildwood, it was up around Corson's Inlet, that would be what? Sea Isle City, I think, they came ashore at Sea Isle City.

MS: I know that there were also a couple of times on Long Island they came ashore.

JB: But there was a close coordination between these civilian auxiliary units and the regular Coast Guards. So that part of our family, my father, actively engaged, for sure, and telling my brother and I, "You stay in college and do your lessons."

KB: It seems that wasn't to be, you were called up in 1943 to active duty.

JB: Yes.

KB: Can you tell us about that?

JB: Well, let's go back to '42, because there was no doubt in my mind that I should apply for the advanced course here at Rutgers, and did, and got accepted. But that summer, I got a letter, from the Rutgers ROTC headquarters, that in order to be accepted into the advanced course for the junior year, I'd have to go join the Army. So the nearest place was Camden, New Jersey. So I went and enlisted. I enlisted in September of '42. So when I came back on campus, I was in what they called the ERC, Enlisted Reserve Corps, and then it made it easy for the Army to just activate, call us up to active duty in the Enlisted Reserve Corps, which they did in '43. We went over to Fort Dix and got outfitted as privates in early 1943.

KB: You were part of the Black Fifty. [Editors Note: The fifty Class of '44 ROTC members who were shipped down to Fort McClellan, in Anniston, Alabama whom one Sergeant proclaimed was "the blackest bunch of white men he ever saw."]

JB: Part of the Black Fifty.

MS: Do you think your ROTC training was better than as a drafted soldiers?

JB: Yes.

MS: Could you tell us about . . .

JB: ROTC, of course, is designed to turn people like us college students into reserve officers, ready to go on active duty, so almost at day one, you're treated like a plebe would be treated at West Point. So there was no doubt about it, when we were activated off the campus here. Normally, when you're a junior, in the advanced ROTC, you go to camp for the summer and take a lot of field training, marksmanship, and all that sort of thing. In our case, when we were activated, we hadn't gone to camp, so they said, "We'll send all you people down to take basic training." So we went down and took a regular draftee's training course, but we were way ahead of somebody that just came in because we had quite a bit of training here at Rutgers.

NM: I heard stories, in fact, my own grandfather says that it was really true that they were training with sticks and bags of flour and . . .

JB: We were so ill-prepared when Pearl Harbor came, you know, as you say Army trucks with the word "tank" printed on the side to use in maneuvers, and troops that didn't even have a rifle issued to them, and walked along, literally, as you say, with a wooden carved gun. It sounds ridiculous, but it's incredible that we caught up that way. So that's how we jumped from being Rutgers students on to active duty in '43. I guess you've seen our famous picture as we came back to the Rutgers campus from basic training. Are you familiar with this?

KB: Very, basically my bible.

JB: Oh, good for you.

KB: Mr. Brown is looking at the Rutgers University Class of 1944 Military History Book.

JB: I knew the Targum photographer, so I got ahold of him, and I said, "We're coming back on campus, you ought to take a picture of us," and there we are coming back from basic training because OCS was all jammed up, and so they sent us back to campus to wait our turn to go down to Officer Candidate School at Fort Benning, Georgia.

MS: I have a couple of questions for you.

JB: Do you know who that skinny little guy is on the front row there?

MS: Please tell us who that would be?

JB: Me. You know, the amazing thing about this picture? Have you seen the big cocktail table-sized book called "US Army"? This picture is in there. There is a section that tells the story of ROTC students, Class of 1944, from all over the country being called up, and sent to basic

training, and then on to OCS. Because in their wisdom, the Army people said, “We’re going to need 2nd lieutenants in large numbers and so let’s not let these students get away from us. Let’s keep our hands on them and turn them into 2nd lieutenants as fast as we can because we’re going to be creating these new infantry divisions,” and somebody had figured it out that an infantry lieutenant lasts twenty-one days in combat. So what we did, happened all over the country. One quick funny story: here we are down taking basic training, and there’s college guys like us from dozens of colleges down there. This was at Fort. McClellan, Alabama, and we’re all going around singing our own college songs and driving the old Army sergeants out of their minds. “Shut up you guys, double time.” They couldn’t whittle us down, and then our athletes kept breaking all kinds of records on the obstacle course. They were tough on us but with a bunch of your college buddies you’re not going to break down, and say, “I can’t do it.”

MS: What about your class, were classes put on hold at the time when you were called to basic training, or how did that work or do you get college credits?

JB: Well, of course, everything stopped from an educational standpoint.

MS: Then when you came back to Rutgers after Infantry Basic Training, did you then continue taking classes?

JB: We went into a special program called the Army Specialized Training Program, ASTP. So we didn’t come back to resume regular college again. We were kept as a unit and took specialized Army courses and got college credit.

KB: As far as the ASTP, I’ve read that there was a lot of discrimination in the Army regarding those who are enrolled in ASTP. Did you run into that, people who may have resented it? There was a particular name for it, because of the insignia, it was “the flaming piss pot.” Did you experience any of that?

JB: Well, not within the group, of course, but when we came back, that was the insignia that we all had on our arms, the lamp of knowledge and the flame. Somebody came up with a great term for it, “the flaming piss pot,” so in the outside world, if you went to the USO downtown and a guy who was going to mechanic’s school over at Raritan Arsenal or something, saw a guy with a “flaming piss pot,” he knew he was in a special environment. The Army was sending him to some college to learn college stuff. So, yes, in a tough neighborhood you’d have to cover up your insignia. But we did wear it proudly. We said, “We just have to wait till it’s our turn to go down to OCS,” which didn’t guarantee we’d become officers. So then we went down there, and all this gave us was a shot at going to Officers Candidate School, and they flunked out about one out of four. Everybody in the group didn’t become an officer.

KB: Training in the South, what was that like? Was that a culture shock for a person from Northern New Jersey?

JB: Or Southern New Jersey.

KB: Northern in terms of the Mason Dixon Line, not New Jersey geography. (Although, if the Mason Dixon were extended it would cut New Jersey in two, i.e. North Jersey and South Jersey!)

JB: Oh, yes. We all ran into that cultural shock. Most non-coms in the Army were career Southerners, and they didn't take to these Yankee "smarty-artys." Yes, and when you went out into the Southern towns when you had time off, yes, there's no doubt about it, that it was true, and, of course, there was total segregation in the Army at that time.

KB: What was Officer Candidate School like? You mentioned that there was a high fail out rate, how did you deal with it?

JB: It was academic and physical survival is what it really was. Their technique, academically, at the Infantry School, was to concentrate on one subject at a time. First week was map reading, and you just intently learn quite a bit about map reading, compass work, plotting maps, even creating maps, and then Saturday morning you take a test. Those that didn't pass the test washed out. That was the end.

KB: Where would they go?

JB: They'd go back to be reassigned as enlisted men. Then the next week we'd focus on something else and so it was quite intense academically and physically equally so. The Army was quite convinced, by this time, that particularly young officers had to be mentally and physically tough and smart, because your job was to take over a platoon of about forty people.

KB: Which is what you ended up doing.

JB: Yes.

KB: What was that like? How did that come about, once you graduated OCS? You were assigned to the 63rd Infantry Division in Camp Van Dorn, Mississippi.

JB: I became the leader of the 2nd Platoon, Company K, 3rd Battallion, 255th Infantry Regiment.

KB: Was it a unit that just came together?

JB: Yes. They were there, they were waiting for an officer.

KB: So you had to come in to lead men that you didn't know yet, but, who all knew each other?

JB: Yes, they all knew each other.

KB: Was that difficult?

JB: What had happened to their officer, they sent him on, he was ready to go to Europe. The unit wasn't quite ready. They were in their final stage of training. I got there in August and we shipped out in November. So there I was, in front of forty people, not by myself because I had

some sergeants, because a platoon breaks down into squads, and you have a squad leader, a sergeant and an assistant squad leader, and then you have a platoon sergeant. So I had what we call a cadre of five non-coms to help me get the job done. But it wasn't a terrible shock because we'd, all through OCS, we practiced being platoon leaders, and all through basic training we've learned how to be sergeants and enlisted men, that sort of thing.

NM: Was this your first trip overseas? Going to Europe, what was it like? What were your feelings for you first trip overseas to see combat?

JB: I thought, "This is going to be the greatest experience of my life," and it was. You know, we kidded about it. It was serious but, you know, somebody would say, "John, aren't we lucky? Here the government is sending us on a free trip to Europe and we get all our meals for free on the ship while we're going there." So there was a lot of that kind of tongue-in-cheek humor, I guess you'd call it. But it was, by this time, we'd been so thoroughly indoctrinated that it never occurred to us that there was any other thing to do but what we're doing; you get aboard the ship and go to Europe.

MS: Where did you board the ship and from where did you disembark in Europe? On the trip over was there any danger of enemy submarines, the German submarines, and was it a convoy?

JB: You guys really are pulling out all kinds of memories. We finished our Division training, and here I am with my platoon of Company K, and it's quite a thing to move a whole, a division up to the port of embarkation, getting aboard ship, and we were in Rockland County, that's where we shipped out of, Camp Shanks, New York.

KB: In Nyack, right? My hometown. My grandfather was in the 63rd ID so I actually know quite a bit about it. [Editor's Note: Frederick Henry Bing 63rd ID]

JB: Oh, for heaven's sake. Fantastic. Somebody told me the old warehouses are still there.

KB: They are.

JB: Isn't that amazing. The beginning of the trip to Europe is worth a quick retelling. We had a wonderful Thanksgiving dinner in Camp Shanks, and then we got aboard trains, and they took us down to the port area, we're in Rockland County now, on the Hudson. You won't believe this. We went aboard ferryboats! You can imagine, we're making all kinds of jokes by this point, "We're going to war on a ferryboat." This is nighttime now, down the Hudson River, and there is Manhattan, on our port side, and totally lit up, unbelievable. There's New York City, lower Manhattan, and then down to Brooklyn, where the Army had a big loading facility; they called it the Brooklyn Army Base, I think. Off the ferryboat and across this overhead shed, and there is our troopship, waiting for us, all lit up. It's a big liner!

KB: You mentioned lights a couple of times in this narrative; there was no light discipline, or restrictions, anything like that at this point? The fear of bombing had really subsided?

JB: It had subsided, yes, because there never was any trouble on the Hudson River. So we went aboard, this is Thanksgiving night, but then total discipline. Everybody had to be below decks as our ship pulled out the next morning and started down the Lower Hudson, through the Narrows, and out into the open sea.

MS: The ship was completely black?

JB: Well there was daylight, this was in the morning. But the theory was that they didn't want some bad person with a spy glass seeing ships with thousands of troops aboard. So it would just look like this big liner was going down without anybody showing, but good old Lieutenant Brown [John Brown] said, "I may never get this experience again." So I stepped out of the stateroom and stood behind a lifeboat and watched the Statue of Liberty, and down at the lower end of the island. The Verrazano Bridge wasn't there at that time, then out into the open sea. Which ship was it? This is a quick but interesting story. It was the queen of the Italian Trans-Atlantic Fleet called the *MS Saturnia*. It was considered one of the most beautiful luxury liners of its day, and it was, indeed. It happened to be tied up in its slip in New York when the Italians declared war on the USA, to back up the Germans in December 1941. So what happened, of course, we took over the *MS Saturnia*, turned it into a troop ship, but, bless their hearts, the Italian captain prevailed on our people. He said, "We don't want any trouble, we're not soldiers. We'd like to stay with the ship." So, believe it or not, the ship still had an Italian captain and an Italian crew aboard. Now, we also had a Navy gun crew aboard, because they mounted a five-inch gun on the stern, but here we are going to sea, to war, with an Italian crew.

MS: Were they hospitable to you guys?

JB: Oh, they were fabulous. They were happy that they were going to wait out the war because the captain evidently said, "We can't win the war against America, we love Americans, so just please let us stay with our ship." It's a novel story but, so, believe it or not, it was an Italian captain and crew.

MS: Were you in a convoy with other ships?

JB: By the time we got out on the open sea and we began to form up, and someone told me that it was a thirty-three ship convoy; it was a big convoy. That's three columns, eleven ships to a column, as far as the eye could see; you could see the other ships.

KB: Do you know of any trouble with submarines?

JB: Yes. We were escorted by PBYs as we left, and no sub wants to be around with a PBY looking down on them. Also, we had a cadre of Canadian Corvettes. A Corvette is a small, little destroyer, [DE] a destroyer escort. Good for you. How would you know that?

KB: It's our job.

JB: You guys amaze me with your background and knowledge of things. I shouldn't put it that way, you know, I mean it well. But these Corvettes just circled the convoy constantly. We had

two submarine scares. At night, of course, there was total blackout, anybody that was caught smoking a cigarette on deck, I think they put him in irons; they put him in the brig right quick. Because evidently even a cigarette can be seen a long way away on the water. So other than a couple of sub scares, which suggests that there were subs out there, the wolf packs, and all that sort of thing, but the subs were afraid of these little destroyer escorts and their depth charges. Of course, by this time sonar was pretty good and subs were pretty noisy.

-----END SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE-----

KB: This continuous an interview with John W. Brown, Jr. on the 14th of May, 2004 in New Brunswick, New Jersey. You were speaking of your trip overseas and the convoy that you were in, and submarine problems, if you'd like to continue.

JB: Thank you very much, and, gentlemen, I'm going to say right off, I'm pleased to be able to do this.

KB: We certainly appreciate it.

JB: Not many people are willing to listen to us old guys tell our war stories, particularly our wives. Although, I do have three sons who, up to a point are willing to listen. Although my youngest son will say, "Geez, Dad, that's about the tenth time on that story, can we do another one?" Well, other than those little flurries that I referred to as sub scares, we got across. By the way, we got picked up when we got towards Europe by our aircraft that were already over there. So we had quite a bit of air cover.

MS: I know that enlisted men were basically below decks. They had strings tied up as their bunk beds; did you, as an officer, have a room to yourself? How did you live aboard that ship going over? Was it relatively comfortable or was it not for you?

JB: My platoon was down in the ship's hold and I checked on them frequently, constantly, really. I'd go down. My platoon was all the way down several levels against the bow, because we could hear the waves crashing as we plowed along in heavy seas. That's where they were. The bunks were five high, if you can believe it, so that's a long way for a chap to climb up to get to his top bunk if he's on the fifth level, not pleasant at all, but that's the way it was in order to get untold millions of men across the Atlantic. Officers did fare much better and, I must say, that I was most fortunate. The *Saturnia*, like all cruise ships of that era, luxury liners, had some really superb upper deck facilities and we were in one of them. What had been a suite for a couple, now housed eight lieutenants, but it was still pretty much luxury living. Number one, we were on an upper deck and could step out on a little balcony, and our bunks were only two high, so eight lieutenants, although, we were cramped in a little bit, wasn't all that bad. One funny incident still sticks in my mind. Like many European facilities, not only cruise ships, toilet and bathroom facilities, not only had a nice commode but an adjoining item called a *bidet*, from the French, an appliance used by women for personal hygiene. I'll never forget, and, of course, none of the lieutenants that I went over with had ever seen a *bidet* before, and the one tall, gangly lieutenant from Texas A&M convinced us it was a footbath. It didn't take us long in Europe to find out what a *bidet* was actually used for. We used it as a footbath while we were going over.

Anyway, suddenly, we're in sight of the continent of Europe. We thought we were headed for England, we suddenly discovered that it's not so. We're coming into the Mediterranean, and that huge shape, on the port side of the ship, was The Rock of Gibraltar, so, suddenly we're from the Atlantic Ocean into the Mediterranean Sea. By this time it's December, and the Mediterranean is real grey and dirty looking. We landed in Marseilles, Southern France. Didn't actually land, although, some of the ships were able to go into the dock facilities. Our ship was so large that we were moored offshore and had to climb down the proverbial rope ladder network and into small crafts to be taken ashore. So, suddenly, we're in France and, almost immediately, we're trucked to a staging area. Still remember the name of it, they called it the Delta Base Sector and, in a day or two, all of our equipment had been taken off the ship and delivered to us and pretty soon, everybody had their paraphernalia; their knapsack, and so forth. Then we got orders to get back on trucks. By the way, every night while we were there, over would come a German plane, or two, and that meant every light had to be extinguished to thwart "Bed Check Charlie."

KB: My grandfather, who was in the 63rd, called him "Bed Check Charlie" and I was wondering if that had gotten around?

JB: Yes. "Bed check" was a common phrase in the Army, so we called these flights, once a night, "Bed Check Charlie." The Germans were just irritating us and attempting to frighten us, I guess, with this sole airplane flying, we never did see it, we could just hear it. Next we're moved up a few miles to a rail siding, and there awaited our first real shock in France. There on the siding were these little French boxcars, called in English "Forty and Eights," which meant, from World War I, they had been constructed and designed to hold eight horses, or forty men. So into these little boxcars went the various platoons of forty men. I had exactly forty men to debark off the ship and into the boxcar. Then these boxcars were made into trains, and we started north. We were following the route of our Seventh Army, which had landed in the Marseilles area in August, to complement the Normandy Landing, which had happened in June, and the grand strategy was that the people going from Normandy, across France, towards Germany, and the Seventh Army, coming up from the South, would meet somewhere, and then we'd have a huge united front to move on into Germany. That seemed to be the grand strategy of winning the war in Europe. So we were going up what's called the Rhône Valley, through major French cities like Valence, Dijon, and the second largest city in France, Lyons. By this time we're up, north and west of Paris. We didn't go near Paris, and the train finally stopped three days later. It had been a very slow journey. We didn't travel constantly because we'd stop and the opportunities to feed our troops, at wayside places where the Army had set up feeding facilities. It was obvious we were pretty close to where war had recently been. You could look out in the fields from the train and see bodies out there, and wrecked vehicles, and so forth. Suddenly we're up in northern France, and the train stopped and, once again, we detrained into big, US Army, 6X6s, as our trucks were called, and we began to be moved towards the Rhine River and "the front." Shall I keep going?

KB: Oh, please.

JB: All right. The 63rd Division had been able to get all three of the regiments to the battle front at this time, the 253rd, 254th, and my regiment, the 255th. Our artillery was not with us. They

hadn't quite finished their training at Fort Sill, where I suspect your grandfather had been, to learn his tools of the trade.

KB: I don't think he went to Fort Sill; maybe the headquarters battery was different, because he was with the headquarters.

JB: Each regiment was kind of fanning out. As you know, there are three battalions per regiment. Our battalion was moved closer to the front. Each battalion has four companies and our companies were moved a little bit closer. My Company K was ordered into a little town called Fort Louis, right on the Rhine River. There had been another Army unit that had been there, and they were pulled back to go someplace else.

KB: Do you remember what unit?

JB: I think it was a unit from the 44th Division, which was interesting, because that was the New Jersey National Guard Division. So, suddenly, there we are, manning a little piece of the front, putting our men in foxholes. In some cases, we used the same foxholes that the other unit had already dug and we settled down to see what was going to happen next. There we were in kind of a ready occupation on a quiet front, so to speak. A couple of nights later, however, a German patrol came across the Rhine, and I lost the first of my men. The Germans snuck up on his forward foxhole and shot him. That shot was obviously the enemy. The rest of my people opened up fire so they scared off that patrol. But that was what was common with infantry units; you're feeling out the enemy by sending a few people out to see where they are, and in what strength. So it didn't take us long to realize that we were not in a quiet sector, but the enemy was right out there, across the Rhine River. As a second lieutenant with a platoon, I didn't know, the big picture, except there were units on my right and on my left, and company headquarters was back in the town of Fort Louis, and that the battalion headquarters was back a little bit farther, and the cooks, bless their hearts, came up with hot food twice a day, and we just settled down to be constantly alert. Then we became aware of the fact that suddenly the scene was changing, because I had orders to give up some of my men to be sent back and sent someplace else. What had happened? The Battle of the Bulge had begun, December the 16th, and we gave up some of our fresh troops to bolster some of the Third Army people. At the same time, as the Third Army, which was the next army to ours, pulled back, to swing from facing west, to going north, towards Bastogne and to help blunt the bulge. There was no doubt that we were suddenly in a more active war. The word spread very quickly. "There has been a breakthrough by the Germans in force." It was the major German counter offensive of World War II. Our people had felt that we had pretty well whipped the Germans and, as soon as Spring came, we could finish them off. Even with our ULTRA, secret devices and everything, it was the surprise of World War II. How the Germans amassed so many men, and re-equipped them, and everything without us catching on to it? Some people say it's still the big mystery of World War II. It meant that we had to spread out and fill in where the Third Army had pulled back to swing north. We swung north along the line until our Seventh Army, they claimed, was covering an eighty-four mile front, and things became much more active. We would get more occasional artillery fire dropped on us. It put us on total alert. The Bulge raged. The Germans pushed in a great number of miles, I guess, forty or fifty miles. They were on their way to Antwerp with the idea of splitting the Allies. It was a beautifully conceived military plan, and our retaliation, as I'm sure you all know, was to

reorganize the Allies into North and South. Montgomery had the north side of this huge bulge in our line and Bradley from the south, with Patton as his major tool to work with and it worked. By Christmas time, Patton got to Bastogne and saved the 101st Airborne, which had been completely surrounded, and it looked like things were pretty well contained. But then, unbelievably Hitler had held back eight divisions. Are you familiar with Northwind? Charles Whitting wrote a marvelous book called *The Battle of the Bulge: Operation Northwind*. They had held back eight divisions, including one that had just come in from Finland, and here came another major assault, New Year's Eve. There were some indication that this was going to happen to us, because ULTRA, our secret listening equipment, picked up on this second assault of the big offensive, and General Sandy Patch, our commanding general, of the Seventh Army, told all of our people, down to our level, that, "There's something else coming. You got to be ready." So New Year's Eve, my unit, my platoon, my company, my battalion, got orders to move north, and we got caught in this second major wave around a place called Bitche. In fact, we were going to have an organization after the war called the Sons of Bitche, but it never got off the ground. We settled for the 63rd Division Association. By the way, we have our annual convention in Washington, D.C. in August of 2004, and we'll all be gathering for that. So I got my first Battle Star, my Combat Infantryman's Badge and a Bronze Star for playing a significant role in that second big Battle of the Bulge.

KB: We always ask veterans who earned honors like Bronze Stars, what was your citation? What was the specific incident that earned you the medal? I understand it has two oak leaf clusters as well.

JB: Well I did receive the Bronze Star three times.

KB: Please tell us about this one for now.

JB: They had me recommended for a Silver Star, but somehow in the headquarters it got downgraded to a Bronze Star. I heard some major said, "He was just doing his duty, why do we have to give him a Silver Star?" But this was, my group getting caught in one of the major assaults by SS troopers that had come through at us, and we held our ground. There were a lot of pull-backs, and even retreats, as you may have seen in your military history reading. We lost whole regiments, that gave up, but we held our ground and fought off a considerable group. That's about what the citation said.

KB: When you say we, you mean your platoon?

JB: Yes. We'd been a forward platoon and it would be no shame to pull back, but my company commander said, "Don't let them come through here, because there's nothing behind you, Brown." He didn't quite say, "Stay and fight to the last man," but that was about the size of it. I had some great guys and we stayed our ground. What probably helped us as much as anything, I had a section of machine guns. We had BARs, automatic rifles, but the captain had assigned me a section of machine guns so I had them.

KB: What machine guns?

JB: .30 calibers, from our Company K weapons platoon.

KB: What caliber were they?

JB: .30 caliber. They can throw out an awful lot of lead and if a machine gunner stays his ground, he can do a lot of damage on troops coming at you. I had my guys well dug in, that was part of it, too.

KB: How prepared could you be? How dug in could you be? How dug in was “well dug in”?

JB: Deep enough where you could stand and fire over a little parapet. Some foxholes were just where you could lie down in, but, we all had entrenching tools and I said, “Dig for your lives, you guys.” But it was just holding our ground that we got credit for. The captain was quite eloquent in his wordage, that we had played a significant role in keeping the breakthrough from getting anywhere.

NM: Did the Germans have any heavy weapons? What kind of equipment did they have to go against you?

JB: At this time they were infantry, German infantry, coming at us with their rifles. Of course, there had been any manner of artillery fire dropping on us. I learned to recognize the sound of an 88, and I would suspect that they were 88s, which we feared more than any other artillery weapon that they had because they were so accurate.

KB: How close were you to the Germans? Were you ever in a situation where you are face to face or how close were you when not in an attack? Where were the lines? Once the attack that you described began, how close did they get?

JB: In easy shooting distance, I’d say twenty to thirty yards, some of them got even closer. There were some thought that, as one of my guys said, “You know, Lieutenant Brown, I think they were liquored up.” There was some talk that occasionally, they passed around schnapps. They were shouting at us calling us names. They called us gangsters.

MS: What were the casualties like in your regiment?

JB: I don’t think I could give you a number, but my platoon got down to as low as sixteen people at one time. I would get replacements, of course.

KB: That’s sixteen out of forty.

JB: Yes. Sometimes a person would get sick, things you can get in the middle of winter, flu. I lost my best sergeant; it turned out he had false teeth and his gums went bad on him, and, finally, he couldn’t chew. So I said to him, “go back and try to get fixed up, and come back to me.” I never saw him again. At that time, we’d get replacements, new people would be sent up to us. We had quite a system for replacements. Sometimes a couple of people would come up and

you'd lose them and never really get to know their names, or get to know them. Most of our platoons got down to teens at that period of time.

KB: What was the relationship like between those that had been there for some time and those that were new replacements? How did that interaction play out?

JB: That's a very good question, and there's been a lot of things written about that the new guys were shunned and all that sort of thing. I, speaking personally, I don't think that was true. Boy, you were glad to see another guy come up, and, sometimes, were harsh with a newcomer, but don't forget these were fellows that were pretty well trained by this time. We'd learned not to send up somebody that couldn't handle his rifle or knew what was going on. They weren't battle hardened, but our training got so realistic, you know, we'd lose people in basic training. Everybody had heard bullets whizzing over their heads, and crawled under machine gun fire, in basic training, and thrown live hand grenades, been under artillery fire, so it wasn't just like they'd come off the streets of Rockland County. They were pretty seasoned people in most cases.

KB: In this particular time period, what were your living conditions like? What was it like to be a soldier on the ground, on the line?

JB: Sometimes pretty awful, if not brutal; other times just, dirty, nasty. People didn't get a chance to get a bath for weeks on end, or shave. Sometimes we'd have a chance to put our guys in a barn. I still remember spending a night in a sheep pen one time, with dead sheep in the pen. But when it's twenty degrees outside, you don't mind crawling into a sheep pen. So we crawled around on the dirt; they don't call GIs dogfaces for nothing, but it wasn't always that way. We'd have a chance to take over a farmhouse, and even get the fire going and things like that. It didn't take long, what we'd known all along, people can't live forever out in sub zero cold, or they reach a point where they're so ineffective that if somebody's hands freezes into a fist, they can't fire their weapon, things like that. Everybody learned to take a bath in a helmet full of water, meaning you just splash your face sometimes. But it wasn't endless days and nights of absolute groveling in the dirt, no.

KB: That brings me to medical conditions and then medical care for those that were wounded or injured. What was your experience with that? At what level was your medic? I believe you were wounded, you received a Purple Heart, so what was your experience with that?

JB: Well, let's give an accolade to those medics because they were fabulous guys. We would have a medical battalion, and then a medical aid station, and then, usually, only one medic would be parceled out to each platoon. So, I usually had a platoon medic and the guys were just great. Everybody literally loved them, because they were caring and when needed I never saw an instance where the medics let us down, and they *would* crawl out under fire and take care of the wounded person.

KB: Were they ever targeted? I've read books that said that medics were specifically targeted and that some of them felt the need to even carry sidearms, Colt .45s, which is, of course, against the Geneva Convention. Some didn't even wear their red cross because they felt it was a target.

JB: And I'm here to say that it's true. I had a medic who was shot and killed in front of my eyes, and I said just what you said; I said, "The next medic that I get, I don't want him wearing his cross around," because they were targets. There's no doubt about it. So the next medic I got I said, "I don't want you around here wearing your red cross. Your predecessor isn't here because he did." We got him another helmet. So, yes, it did happen. How frequently, I have no idea, but, yes.

KB: This concludes part one of an interview with John W. Brown, Jr. on May 14, 2004 in New Brunswick, New Jersey. We'll resume interviewing tomorrow, May 15th. 2004.

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Reviewed by Kevin Bing 6/10/04

Reviewed by Sandra Stewart Holyoak 6/19/04

Reviewed By John Brown, Jr. 11/27/04