

Interviewee: Bolte, William J.
Interviewer: Robin Sellers
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Sellers: If you will acknowledge for me, Mr. Bolte, we are recording this with your knowledge and permission.

Bolte: Yes, you have my permission.

Sellers: Okay. Tell me a little bit about where you were born and where you grew up.

Bolte: I was born in Albany, New York, 1925; that's upstate. I traveled around the country a little bit and then went in the service when I was eighteen.

Sellers: Did you graduate from high school?

Bolte: Yes, I did, Philip Schuyler High.

Sellers: So you were still in New York then.

Bolte: Yes. I left for service from New York. I was raised in New York and stayed in that area.

Sellers: Did you enlist or were you drafted?

Bolte: I enlisted. Serial number 12174691 – can't forget that. That's like my Social Security number. I'll never forget the two.

Sellers: When you enlisted, what branch did you enlist in?

Bolte: I enlisted in the Army, and I wanted to go into armored, or tanks, and being just eighteen I thought there was only one way to do that. So they asked me, "What experience do you have?" I said, "Well, my father had a farm and I used to run the tractors." Well, that was not true, but it got me into the armored service.

Sellers: But you did have some familiarity with tractors?

Bolte: Ah, yes.

Sellers: So you weren't just putting yourself out on a limb.

Bolte: Well, it didn't matter because I got in armored, and when I left Fort Dix we were on the train for three days and we got into Fort Knox from Fort Dix — Fort Knox was in Kentucky just out of Louisville — and that's armored headquarters. So when we got off the train — of course all of the blinds were down; we didn't know quite where we were going until three days later I got in Fort Knox about two o'clock in the morning. As I was getting out of the train, I looked up and here was a whole row of flatcars or railroad cars with the silhouettes of tanks. So I said, "I guess I made it." And of course, I did.

Sellers: Did you do a standard basic hitch?

Bolte: Yeah, I did thirteen weeks basic and took some specialized training. Then I came down with spinal meningitis. We were ready to shove off for the European campaign, and the night before we were to leave I went to the post theater and came down with a very heavy fever. Went back to the kitchen and got some hot tonic, and about three o'clock in the morning I woke up and I was very sick. Well, they had to carry me out during the winter to the old confinement hospital, and they didn't know quite what was wrong. Of course, my outfit left. They got decimated in the Kasserine Pass in Europe; lost some 200 tanks in the Kasserine Pass. And that was with the Germans when the Germans turned on the 88s — they were anti-aircraft weapons — and they turned them on our tanks. So looking at that, I guess I was extremely fortunate.

Sellers: I was going to ask you if you have any regrets about that, if you felt guilty, but apparently not.

Bolte: No, because I was in a confined ward for two weeks and almost unconscious. They didn't know quite what I had, so they put me in a contagious ward. And what I wound up with was spinal meningitis, never realizing how serious it was. It didn't leave me with any aftereffects, at least I don't think so at this point and I'm eighty years old. So I guess I survived that well.

Sellers: I think the statute of limitations may have run on that. So you didn't get to go to North Africa and fight.

Bolte: No, I went to — well, of course being sick like that, I had to stay in Fort Knox, and I stayed as cadre, instructors in tank warfare.

Sellers: What was your unit there?

Bolte: 767th Tank Battalion. But I was a cadre, or instructor. Finally one night there was a posting on the bulletin board that they were looking for volunteers for overseas duty. So I was ready to go overseas. So I went down to the main post where they had the meeting and there were some several hundred soldiers that were down there in the hall. They gave a speech down there, that is, the instructors, and said they were looking for people who were somewhat unattached, but anyone else that wanted to leave could leave. So they were going to generate a

very highly specialized unit. Well, I guess there were about forty of us that volunteered, and of the forty there were ten that were finally selected, based on a volunteer basis. Then we took specialized training at Fort Knox in advanced armor, also in the snake demolition and so forth, and went to Bayway, New Jersey, to the Standard Oil chemical plant. They were starting to develop a mechanized flamethrower which they called the E-12; highly sophisticated, very complicated. So we generated an organization back in Fort Knox after we made the viewing in the Standard Oil Company. At that time I was in armored, and there were several people from the Navy, several from the Seabees, and several from the Marine Corps. And we were what we call a “bastard outfit” – there was nothing like it in the service. So what we did is we instituted the first mechanized flamethrower unit in the armed services for the Pacific.

Sellers: Did you have a unit designation for it?

Bolte: Just a mechanized flamethrower unit. There was no specific numerization in Fort Knox, but when we got overseas, we then were attached to the 251st Chemical Warfare Battalion. They in turn worked with us, and we in turn worked with the Marines. And we had a couple of real genius people from the Seabees battalion that was attached to us. Through their ingenuity and everyone else that contributed, we generated a very simplistic form of a mechanized flamethrower unit called the E-5. Less complicated. And through that we developed that unit and built up the first mechanized flamethrower units in our M43-E8 tanks; that’s a medium Sherman tank. At that time we didn’t have that broad an experience, so what was happening, based on the early models that we saw at Standard Oil, these tanks were equipped with a 75 millimeter cannon. That was our main firepower. Well, in order to install the flamethrower, we had to cut off the breechblock in the back of the 75 and we installed the mechanism that goes into the tube of the 75. Well, that wasn’t a very smart thing to do, because then with no main firepower, it put the armor at a disadvantage. So one of our guys decided, “That’s ridiculous. We’re ruining the 75 millimeter cannon;” they blowtorched the breechblock right off of the mechanism. What had happened is a guy came up with the idea of putting a dummy tube right alongside of the 75. Of course, when the Japanese saw this, they didn’t know quite what to make of it because here we had twin 75 millimeter cannons on the front of this tank. So based on that, we still maintained the firepower with the 75 and then had the mechanized flamethrower unit. And we used napalm, which you see being used in Vietnam and so forth, which was a granulated aluminum soap. We used anywhere from 7 to 9 percent mix. I still have all the specs for this, so I was thinking about building one myself today [laughter].

Sellers: Won’t that get you into trouble with some government agency now?

Bolte: Who cares at my age? No, I’ve had it hidden away in the attic for all these years and this is the first time I’ve dug it out.

Sellers: I hope nobody’s listening in on this.

Bolte: I don’t care; let them listen! So what we would do is mix a 5 1/4 pound tin of granulated aluminum soap, which looks like your old Rinso, into a 55-gallon drum of gasoline or diesel fuel

or bunker fuel depending on what range you wanted. We had a range of 60 feet, which is quite a ways, with a 9 percent mix. That is 9 percent, which we considered a 55-gallon drum with a full 5-pound can of granulated aluminum soap. And if you concentrated that down anywhere to a range of about 7 percent, the heavier concentration the greater the range. If you wanted to use plain diesel fuel or bunker-C, you'd have a range of about 60 feet. We would use that to go to the mouth of a cave. Maybe you wanted to go ahead and dispense any of the snipers in the palm trees, you'd use the 9 percent mix to create a solid rod of fuel. The force was so great it would upend anybody it hit.

Sellers: Were you passing all of this information along to some of the other tank battalions, or was this your unit's specifically?

Bolte: No, it was ours particularly. What we were doing was we were outfitting the Marines of the 4th and 5th Marine Division, 5th Tank Battalion. We built these units up in Scofield Barracks in Kolekole Pass. That's where the Japs came through first and that's where we were stationed, out at Kolekole Pass. So we were outfitting the Marines with their armor. The first time the Marines came in and saw us in the early stages cutting of the breechblocks, they were going to court martial everybody. But it didn't take us long to wise up to the fact that, "Hey, this is no way to go." In about three months, we decided against cutting off the breechblocks. But if you could see the colonel in the Marine Corps – we had a crane lifting out the breechblocks. So we totally destroyed the 75s.

Sellers: Give me a time frame on this.

Bolte: This is back in early '45. And that's when they were used. Of course, we developed them for going into the invasion of Japan and Okinawa and Leyte and down through the Ryukyus. So the situation is that prior to the drop of the atomic bomb, we had mixed – we didn't – we had a battalion that was mixing our fuel as we were getting set ourselves to go and make the invasion of Tokyo. And we had 150,000 gallons of napalm already pre-mixed in 55-gallon drums ready to leave. We were only weeks away before we were going to probably be one of the people in the invasion force. So we had with us at that time quite a few tanks already outfitted for that invasion. But mainly it first started with Okinawa, and that was the first real use of these units. They had some portable units that we could also use, a portable hose to hook onto our tanks, and they could go up into the areas where the tanks couldn't get in close enough.

Sellers: What exactly was your job in all this?

Bolte: I was just another GI. There were ten of us.

Sellers: You were in the tanks?

Bolte: Oh, sure.

Sellers: What was your position in the tank?

Bolte: I was the tank commander at that time.

Sellers: When you got to the Pacific, when was that?

Bolte: That was in 1945.

Sellers: What situation did you find when you got there? Was there any scuttlebutt about how long this was going to last?

Bolte: No, never heard about that. Never had really time to think about it. Back then it was a different attitude. I never gave it a second thought. I guess I was pretty gung-ho, being kind of young at that time, and when I took my basic training at Fort Knox, I went through the infiltration course three times, twice on my own. I'd go down to the firing range and run up several hundred rounds of ammunition, and this is what I'd do in my spare time. But I never thought about it until the evening before I was getting discharged at Fort Dix, and then it began to hit me.

Sellers: That you had been in harm's way?

Bolte: Never thought about it. I didn't think about that part of it. I thought about "finally I'm going home." But I never thought about going home during the war. But you know, we were in a different frame of mind back then. Quite different than the Korean War. And I was going through some of my old papers and of course, in moving from south Florida up here, my discharge was lost. So I went to the VA and they sent information up to New York or wherever and they told us that all the records of the GIs back in that period of time were destroyed by fire.

But anyway, prior to that, in 1950, I was coming home and opened the garage door and here was a big brown manila envelope in my garage door from the San Francisco Presidio. I opened it up; it was from a colonel and said, "You will report to San Francisco Presidio immediately upon receiving this document." I said, "Wait a minute. I didn't enlist! These guys are crazy!" I went over to San Francisco (I lived in Hayward, California, at the time) and he had a sergeant major, young lady at the desk. I said, "Listen, young lady, there's got to be a mistake here. I didn't enlist in this thing; I'm discharged." She said, "Well, I think Colonel _____ [??] — if you'll be seated, he'd like to talk to you." So I went in and I was a little aggressive, I guess, at first. He said, "Why don't you sit down." I said, "Nah, I haven't got time to sit down." He said, "I think you ought to." I said, "Wait a minute; I didn't sign up for anything." He says, "Well, you had what we consider a primary MOS number, 1745." My experience in armor and also we were the developing outfit that developed the mechanized flamethrower. And he said, "That justifies you being called, and you're being called. Now if you don't want to go ahead and re-enlist in the Reserves, we can call you up to active duty for Korea right now." So I said, "That's blackmail." He says, "That's right, it is."

Sellers: So did you end up in Korea?

Bolte: No, I did not. I stayed for the Reserves. So he said, “Yeah, there’s a promotion if you decide to go voluntarily.” I said, “Well, that’s great.” So I got discharged as a corporal, he offered me an E-5, which was a staff sergeant, and went to Oakland, California, and there was the 351st Tank Battalion in Oakland, California. So I was the only one that was experienced in armor. So I was only there a couple of months and I got an advancement to E-6, which was a tech sergeant, and another six months and I became master sergeant. So if I hadn’t left for the East Coast, I’d have stayed in, I think, because I could have accrued points for retirement. And that was my story on the West Coast. And they’re still hounding me for \$38.17; I found that out.

Sellers: For what?

Bolte: For my clothing when I left California – \$14.80 for two pair of GI boots and so forth and so on. I laughed when I read this stuff. And I had sent letters back because I had gotten married and we decided to go East. I wanted to stay in the Reserves, and if I could have found an armor outfit in Florida, south Florida, I would have stayed in. But they didn’t have an armor outfit, so I had chosen not to. So I kept getting these notices of “reimburse the Army” for \$38.08 —

Sellers: How late? What years?

Bolte: 1956-‘57.

Sellers: Ten years later.

Bolte: Oh, sure. And they spent more trying to — so what I did is I finally answered them, and the funny part of it, I left the clothing at a rooming house that I had stayed at in California. I told them, I sent a very nice letter to the captain and explained it all. I said the clothing was left in the garage and so forth and so on. I got a nice letter back from him and he wished me well on my marriage, and he said, “If you ever want to come back, you can have a job here in our battalion.”

Sellers: So they went and found the clothing?

Bolte: No, they didn’t. Because what happened, the lady that had the rooming house sold the house and everyone threw everything else out. So I guess I still owe the government \$38.08.

Sellers: I don’t think it’s going to help with our budget deficit.

Bolte: Not hardly, but I thought it was funny. But you know, you get back all these years and start reading some of this stuff — I haven’t been into that in years.

Sellers: You said you were writing back and forth, you had gotten married. Did you get married before you went overseas?

Bolte: No, that was after. That was in World War II and this was during the Korean crisis.

Sellers: Who were you writing to during World War II? Anybody?

Bolte: My mother.

Sellers: How was your mother dealing with her boy being away?

Bolte: Well, my stepfather was with the 1st Seabee Battalion. I wanted to sign up for the Seabees and my stepfather wrote her and said, "Don't let him do it."

Sellers: Did he have a reason?

Bolte: Yeah. He didn't think it was a good place. He was a master mechanic, but he was in Guadalcanal and several of the other places. We crossed each other several times in the Pacific, and he was either late or early getting there. And we did the same thing when I come back from overseas into San Francisco. I went to the San Francisco naval base and I just missed him; he'd already been on his way home for discharge. But yeah, he was in the 1st Seabee Battalion.

Sellers: Did you ever actually meet up with him?

Bolte: Never.

Sellers: You just missed each time.

Bolte: Three or four different times we had crossed.

Sellers: Were you ever actually in harm's way?

Bolte: Some time.

Sellers: How did you deal with it? Did you lose close friends?

Bolte: Yes, I did.

Sellers: Does that haunt you?

Bolte: No. I never thought about it. It may seem hard, but you know, when you're there you don't have time to think, and as the years go by, your memory gets fainter.

Sellers: Have you kept up with any others in the group over there years? Have there been reunions?

Bolte: Well, because there were only ten of us — see, the thing with our unit was we had — there were ten enlisted men and we had seven officers. We had three majors and four captains. It's really lopsided, but we never thought about it at the time. I do remember our commanding officer which was Major Hale. And I'll never forget our second in command, Captain Hare — he was a wild guy. And his son used to — he was assigned in the Pacific theater as a master sergeant for rescue craft. I was invited out on a couple different trips to fish, and old Captain Hare, he used to like to drink. They used to make some bets and they used to eat raw squid — who could eat the most raw squid right out of the bucket.

Sellers: Ugh.

Bolte: Yeah, that's what I thought. But there's a lot of funny things that happened.

Sellers: Were you obligated to join in?

Bolte: No. We had a general on that first trip, too. I can't think of his name, and there was no 'sir', no nothing, go by first names. So it wasn't all bad.

Sellers: Did you ever get any chance to go on leave?

Bolte: Not overseas. I never had a pass until I got back and we were coming into Oakland, California, and the first thing I saw, it was the *Orizaba*, which was the command ship in the Philippines — looking down on the docks in Oakland, here was a newspaper, "TD&R extended to returning GIs." Temporary duty and rest and recuperation. So I got back there in September of '45; I could have been discharged in September of '45 because of the points. So when I got back, I went back to Fort Knox and I applied for a 30-day TD&R. So they issued a 30-day TD&R. So when I got back from TD&R before my term was up, I asked for another 30-day TD&R. So I wound up getting 120 days TD&R, and I was getting paid! So after the third one, I went back in and took my discharge, in February of 1946. I could have been out in September of '45.

Sellers: Where were you when the atomic bomb was dropped?

Bolte: I was sitting north of Honolulu. All of us were sitting there and we were getting set because we knew what was coming up.

Sellers: How did you know?

Bolte: Because of what we were doing. We had outfitted two battalions of tanks, almost 150,000 gallons of napalm had just been completely mixed in 55-gallon drums stacked up. So this was on a Sunday that we were setting there and somebody had a little radio and we turned it on and it said that they dropped the first atomic bomb. So we felt then that that was the end of the war. But precluding that, when we first got to the 251st Chemical Warfare Battalion, there

was a brilliant young fellow that came in from New York. And we couldn't figure out what he was doing, because he didn't have any armor experience or anything else. He stayed with us three days. He was sitting on a bed across from me and talking with four or five of us, and he said, "You know, there's going to be something happening that will turn the tide of the war." And what we found out later, that he was very familiar with the atomic bomb, had worked within parts of that system. So I'll never forget that.

Sellers: Do you remember his name?

Bolte: I can't think of his name to save my soul. But a brilliant young fellow. Couldn't have been more than twenty-six, twenty-five. Yep. And it registered on me that day that we were sitting in Hawaii when they dropped that first bomb.

Sellers: He knew something.

Bolte: But he disappeared. Three days later we get back into the barracks and he was gone and no one knew anything. So I assume he was attached with something to do with the drop of the first bomb. This is not far-fetched, this is fact. But there was a reason then. Need I say any more?

Sellers: No. What do you think your wartime experiences did for you?

Bolte: Well, I thought enough of it that I thought my son should enlist. So several years my wife and I, and we took our son who turned eighteen, we went to Hawaii and spent several weeks in Hawaii and he wanted to see the base where I operated out of, which was Scofield Barracks. So the three of us drove up to the gate, and he said, "Do you think you can get in?" I says, "I think so." I still had my ID. And they allowed us in, and we weren't in the gate ten minutes and this group of motley-looking soldiers came walking down the road by the car. And he said, "Who are those?" I said, "I guess they're soldiers." And they were. And that discouraged him from enlisting. When he saw the condition – and they were soldiers. But the discipline had dropped and changed so much during that period of time that it discouraged him from enlisting. Because he was ready to enlist. But I thought it would have been great experience, great for discipline, and an experience which I don't think he could get anywhere else.

Sellers: But he opted out.

Bolte: Right. He'll tell you to this day, that was one of the things that changed his mind.

Sellers: What did you think? Were you appalled by their condition?

Bolte: Yeah, sure. The total lack of discipline —

Sellers: Not the Army you remembered.

Bolte: No. Well, I probably I shouldn't say that I expected it to be the same; I don't think it could have. But you know, I had traveled a great deal in the business I was running, and on one occasion I was onboard a flight from Los Angeles to Boston, Mass., and there was a lieutenant colonel on the plane alongside of me. And he was heading back and he was taking a discharge. And he had twenty-three years in the military. We got pretty familiar, and I said, "You're staying in?" He said, "No, absolutely not. You know, trying to get discipline out of your service people is a no-no any more. You're criticized for being too tough." Here's a man of the military, twenty-three years, lieutenant colonel going for colonel, and decided to opt out.
[conversation about the current military not transcribed]

Sellers: Did you use the GI Bill?

Bolte: No, I didn't.

Sellers: Not in any way?

Bolte: I used the GI Bill to get a house in California, and that was it.

Sellers: So you didn't come back and go to college?

Bolte: No, I didn't. But I did go to college in East Hartford, Connecticut, in engineering.

Sellers: But you didn't use the GI Bill for that?

Bolte: No.

Sellers: Had the time expired?

Bolte: Yes.

Sellers: Can you think of anything else you want to add to the tape?

Bolte: I don't have any points of wisdom, I'm afraid.

Sellers: Any day-to-day experiences or anecdotes you recall?

Bolte: Well, the best thing that happened to me is getting married to my wife, and we've been married fifty-one years. Fifty-one years is a long time.

Sellers: If you made that stick, then you must have done something right.

Bolte: It's her fault because she's too patient.

Sellers: Maybe she thinks it's worth it. Let me ask you once again if we've tape recorded this with your permission?

Bolte: You have recorded it with my permission.

End