

Interviewee: Beller, Harold
Interviewer: Robin Sellers
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Sellers: Mr. Beller, do we have your permission to tape record this interview?

Beller: Yes, you do.

Sellers: Thank you. Would you start out, please, by giving me a little bit of background, such as where you were born and grew up?

Beller: Well, I grew up in the Bronx, in New York City.

Sellers: I thought I detected that. You can't take the Bronx out of the kid, no [chuckling]. When were you born, do you mind?

Beller: 1924.

Sellers: Oh, just the right time.

Beller: Just the right time, yes.

Sellers: What was your life like as you were growing up?

Beller: We had a lot of fun. We had a bunch of kids around and we played all kinds of games and went to the same schools.

Sellers: Pretty much a standard growing up time in the '30s?

Beller: Yes, it was.

Sellers: Was your family affected adversely by the Depression?

Beller: Well, I think everybody was, more or less. Yeah, we were.

Sellers: To the extent that, did you work through high school?

Beller: Not that bad. No, I went through high school, and we managed to get through pretty good.

Sellers: Okay, you were some of the luckier ones, then.

Beller: Yeah. Yeah.

Sellers: Tell me a little bit about what you knew about the trouble that was going on in Europe at the end of '30s and very early 1940.

Beller: Well, I was pretty young at the time. I knew what was going on and everything, and I went through high school and, you know, I knew we were in for something after that because of my age.

Sellers: Because of your age? Was there a lot of talk among the boys in high school about the war?

Beller: Oh yeah, yeah, there was.

Sellers: What year did you graduate?

Beller: In '42.

Sellers: Okay, so it was after Pearl Harbor. Do you remember the reaction that you and your friends had when you learned about Pearl Harbor?

Beller: Well, we knew – we kind of expected something to happen like that and we knew what was going to happen.

Sellers: So you were in for it? Did you enlist or were you drafted?

Beller: I was drafted when I got out of high school, just about in '42.

Sellers: You graduated in the late spring or early summer of '42?

Beller: In January.

Sellers: Oh, January? So right after Pearl Harbor?

Beller: Yeah, right.

Sellers: You were drafted into the Army?

Beller: Yes. I went to Fort Dix in New Jersey to get inducted.

Sellers: Then where?

Beller: And then we went to basic training. We got inducted there and then went to basic training in Camp Robinson. That was in Arkansas.

Sellers: Tell me a little bit. What was your day-to-day life in Camp Robinson like?

Beller: I didn't like it too much. It was infantry basic. Basic, and, you know, we had all this stuff about firearms and gas training and hiking and that kind of stuff.

Sellers: Had you ever been exposed to anything like that before as you were growing up – hunting or anything?

Beller: No. No.

Sellers: So this is all totally new to you.

Beller: Yeah, right.

Sellers: And I gather that you didn't have a really good impression of it. Didn't think much of it?

Beller: No, no. But you get used to it a little bit at that age. And then stayed in Camp Robinson, and after that, let's see, we went to — they got me into the 79th Infantry Division after the basic training.

Sellers: And where were they based?

Beller: At the time I joined them, they were in Camp Forrest, Tennessee. So they shipped us to Camp Forrest, in Tennessee, and then we stayed there a few months or six months or so. And then, you know, we had, like, maneuvers and stuff, and they sent me into the Medics Division. I was in the 304th Medical Battalion.

Sellers: Did you show an affinity for that? Was there a reason for them doing that?

Beller: No, I didn't care for it.

Sellers: It was just arbitrary on their part?

Beller: Yeah. I wanted to get into the Air Force, really, but my eyes weren't that good, so I couldn't make that. So I guess I was lucky I didn't get into the infantry regiment. The medics was a little – not too bad – at first.

Sellers: Did they give you particular medical training?

Beller: Yes, we had medical training. First aid and stuff like that. Ambulance driving.

Sellers: Tell me a little bit about the training. What did they teach you to do?

Beller: How to treat wounds, you know, in the field. It was with the infantry, so we didn't do that much in the way of medical. We just kind of gave them fast bandages and just got them enough to get back to the hospital.

Sellers: Okay, just kind of stop-the-bleeding-type thing.

Beller: Yeah. Right, exactly, because we didn't have much in the way of equipment. They had more stuff over in the hospital, where we had to get them to. And then we went to Camp Laguna in Arizona for more training in the desert there. We stayed there a few months and then went to Camp Phillips in Kansas. It was wintertime, and that was pretty bad.

Sellers: But you're from New York. You'd been in cold weather.

Beller: Oh yeah, that didn't bother me, but just the fact that I'm going from a desert into

—
Sellers: Oh, I see. When do they get through knocking you around the country and actually let you know that you're going to go somewhere?

Beller: Just about then. We went to Myles Standish in Massachusetts, where we shipped over to the European Theater.

Sellers: Did you know ahead of time that you were going to the European Theater?

Beller: Oh, yeah, we knew that. Yeah, we knew that. And we went to — the name of the boat was the *Strathmore*, if anybody remembers that. I think it was a British boat that we got onto in Miles Standish.

Sellers: About what time was this. Was this into 1943 now?

Beller: Yeah, 1943.

Sellers: Summertime? Wintertime?

Beller: It was sort of Fall, I guess. And then we went to — let's see, where did we go to?

Sellers: Did you go in a convoy?

Beller: Yeah, well, oh yeah, tremendous big convoy. You couldn't even — some days

you couldn't see the other ships and some days they were right on top of each other. And, you know, we'd see them dropping those bombs for subs.

Sellers: The depth charges?

Beller: Depth Charges, yeah.

Sellers: Did you have any encounters with subs, other than seeing the destroyers drop them?

Beller: No, the only way we knew was we saw them drop the bomb – you know, we saw them going off and we didn't know anything else.

Sellers: How were your sea legs?

Beller: Not too bad. Some kids, some of them had it really bad. There wasn't much room. We had to sleep in the mess hall on four-high bunks, in the mess hall down there. There wasn't much room. And then that took us to – where did we land?

Sellers: Scotland or England?

Beller: In Scotland. What was the name of that big —

Sellers: Prestwick? Glasgow? Edinburgh?

Beller: No, way up north it was. Liverpool.

Sellers: Liverpool. Now, Liverpool's in England.

Beller: Oh, well, then we landed in England.

Sellers: Okay. [chuckling]

Beller: Okay, and then we shipped all the way down to port, you know, the Channel —

Sellers: Southampton?

Beller: Down in – let's see – one of the ports down there.

Sellers: Southampton was where a lot of them went in.

Beller: Southampton, I guess, that was it. If it wasn't there, it was one nearby. There was about three places where they shipped the GIs over.

Sellers: What did they have you doing once you got to England?

Beller: We did some more training, hiking, and stuff like that. And we knew, you know, that it was coming pretty soon.

Sellers: There were rumors of the invasion?

Beller: Oh yeah. A lot of rumors about that.

Sellers: How did you feel about that?

Beller: Well, I didn't feel too bad at the time. You know, when your eighteen somehow it's a lot different than when you get older, and most of the guys felt the same way.

Sellers: You didn't think that you personally were going to be one of the wounded, is that right?

Beller: No, no. You don't really, until you're there, maybe.

Sellers: Your son says that he thought you landed in Normandy a few days after D-day. Can you kind of take me through that?

Beller: Yeah, we did. We didn't actually know when D-day was until it happened, like a day or so after that. We landed in – let's see – in Utah Beach about a week after D-day. That's when we landed. And they were still shelling the beach at that point. You know, they weren't too far inland. It was kind of tough then because we, you know, it was the first time, you know, we saw combat. We were in the Combat Medics, that's what they called the outfit of 304th Medical Battalion.

Sellers: And tell me what that meant.

Beller: Well, we were crawling up along the beach, and you know, you kind of get scared after you hear some of the shells dropping around and you get to a little more inland where you can take some cover. And then a lot of people didn't know where we were or what to do next, you know, until we got organized because the whole outfit was kind of scattered around.

Sellers: Well, how did they get you to Utah Beach? Did you go over on an LST?

Beller: LST. We went over on a larger boat and then we got into these little boats to take us in to the beach, and then we just unloaded there and we were on our way into France.

Sellers: Can you kind of describe what it was like going up onto the beach? You said there were gunshots and things like that. Was it run and then dodge, sort of like *Private Ryan*?

Beller: No, not quite that bad. The Germans were kind of inland more, so we saw some of the – I don't know what they call them – those where they shoot the guns from, you know, from the beach —

Sellers: The pillboxes?

Beller: The pillboxes, yeah. We saw a lot of them around there. And then from there we just kept going. We went into Cherbourg.

Sellers: What kind of conditions did you find in the French towns as you went through?

Beller: Well, we didn't see too many civilians, but most of them, they had their own problems. Most of them were farmers and they were taken care of their — I saw a lot of dead cows and horses, stuff like that, you know.

Sellers: You didn't meet any resistance from the French?

Beller: No, we didn't meet any resistance.

Sellers: Were you given any help by the French?

Beller: Yeah, they gave us a lot of booze to drink [laughs]. That was apple country. Some of them were pretty happy to see us. And we saw some of those gliders that the glider troops landed. You know, we saw a bunch of them, all wrecked on the beach, on the inland a little bit.

Sellers: What kind of aid were you giving? What kind of wounds were you running in to and things?

Beller: Shrapnel wounds and gunshot wounds, mostly. And then we'd get them — the litter bearers would take them back into where the ambulances were and take them back to aid station.

Sellers: How close to you were the ambulances, do you know?

Beller: They were just a little ways back, not too far back.

Sellers: Did you have – I don't know quite how to ask – did seeing all the wounded men – did you feel as if you were accomplishing something or did you ever feel like it was a terrible waste? What were your feelings while you were there doing this for the first few days?

Beller: We felt like we were helping out a lot. I didn't figure it was any waste.

Sellers: How far did you get into France?

Beller: We went all through France. Let's see where we were here — we went into Belgium. You know, the same kind of stuff. Mostly the Germans were retreating, and maybe once in a while they'd stop and put up a battle by some of the larger towns. Then we went into Holland and the Netherlands, and then into Germany, you know, with the same type of thing.

Sellers: When nighttime came, did you stop?

Beller: Oh yeah, well, mostly we'd stop. Everybody would more or less stop. You'd see a lot of bullets or some kind of bullets flying around.

Sellers: Where did you stay? Were you staying in barns or did you put up tents or what?

Beller: We stayed in foxholes mostly. We had to dig a foxhole as soon as we stopped, you know, as soon as we stopped, and barns, old houses, and stuff like that.

Sellers: What were you eating?

Beller: Mostly rations, C-rations, K-rations. And once in a while they'd set up a chow line and we'd have some halfway decent food at the time.

Sellers: How far from the front were you?

Beller: Well, there was no real front when we were there. The front was scattered all over. A lot of times we were right there at the front and sometimes we were a little bit behind the front, and then wait for, you know, something to happen and we'd go up where we could help.

Sellers: Do you know or do you recall or have a sense of how long it took you to get through France?

Beller: Yeah, through France it took about four or five months. We never got to Paris, so we bypassed Paris and then we got into Belgium.

Sellers: None of the fun, huh?

Beller: No. Nah, we missed that.

Sellers: As you went on deeper into Europe, how did the civilians strike you?

Beller: They were mostly happy, mostly, it seemed like — when we went into a new town. There wasn't much really left of anything, you know. Everything was kind of beat up. You

couldn't see — some of the farm houses were standing, but through of the towns they had tremendous — well, I guess you knew about that bombing they did there, with your father telling you about it. They were mostly destroyed. You couldn't hardly even get through the town at the time.

Sellers: Did you ever have the opportunity to become friendly or stay long enough to get to know any of the civilians as you went along?

Beller: Well, not too much. In Germany, we had a little more time, but going through we didn't see that many. We were busy just moving along there, you know, getting through.

Sellers: Did the casualties increase the further you went into Europe or did it lessen?

Beller: Well, the worst part was at the landing, you know, around Utah Beach and a little ways in; then it was not that terrible anymore.

Sellers: Were you still just detailed for medical or were you asked to do other things?

Beller: No, I was an ambulance driver also, and an aid man, mostly a medical aid man.

Sellers: If you were driving an ambulance, what was that like? How many would fit in the ambulance? How far did you have to go? Things like that.

Beller: The ambulance held like four stretchers or a bunch of partially wounded people would sit inside, maybe six or eight people could sit in there plus four litters if they were really bad. We really didn't have to go too far, you know, to the aid station, and then that was it.

Sellers: Where did you end up and stay the longest?

Beller: Well, after that, let's see — we stayed in Germany, mostly, most of the time when the war ended as a, like, an occupation, you know, service.

Sellers: Where in Germany?

Beller: We stayed in Strasbourg, Lauterburg, and a few towns like that.

Sellers: Where exactly did you stay? Were you put into houses?

Beller: Yeah, then we stayed in mostly old barracks or an old hospital, we stayed in after that.

Sellers: Did you have an opportunity to get to know any of the German civilians at that point?

Beller: Yeah, we did, because we were there a long time and, you know, the war was either over or almost over.

Sellers: What was their attitude?

Beller: Their attitude was mostly trying to clean up their areas and get back to where they came from. You know, we saw a prisoner of war. We also went to Czechoslovakia for a short while, where I saw the first prisoner of war camp. I was pretty shaken up to see that.

Sellers: Are we talking about one of the concentration camps?

Beller: Well, it was more – it looked like just a prisoner of war – it wasn't a concentration – you could call it, I guess, a concentration camp.

Sellers: Was it for American prisoners?

Beller: No, it was for all Europeans.

Sellers: There were a lot of displaced persons, I'm sure.

Beller: Oh, plenty. They were roaming around, but these were taken prisoner, you know, way before. They were there a long time.

Sellers: And you said that shook you up, pretty much?

Beller: Yeah. Yeah.

Sellers: What kind of conditions were they in?

Beller: They were in pretty bad conditions. They had these old uniforms on and they couldn't hardly see or walk, most of them. We'd get together and get some cigarettes or candy or stuff like that to give them, because there was nobody there to take care of them or to release them.

Sellers: They were just abandoned by the Germans?

Beller: Yeah, they just took off. The Germans took off and left them. They were really free, but they were still within their enclosures. They didn't know where to go. It took a while until that happened.

Sellers: Yeah, I can imagine that they would be kind of confused. What kind of news were you getting of the progress of the war while you were coming through Germany?

Beller: Well, we get that I don't know what they call that newspaper. That army newspaper.

Sellers: *Stars and Stripes*?

Beller: *Stars and Stripes* mostly, or we'd have a meeting once and a while. If the higher-ups got some information, they'd tell us, or maybe where we were going. But that was mostly it.

Sellers: Was it just kind of a matter of spending your time and doing what they told you until it was over and you just figured sooner or later it would have to be over.

Beller: Yeah, well, we'd have our rest area once in a while, you know, and take us out of combat, more like for maybe two weeks or so.

Sellers: For that long?

Beller: Yeah. Or to get replacements. You know, they lost a lot of men in that 79th Division, a lot of infantry guys. I think they turned it over about two times the original amount of GIs that were killed. Yeah, it was bad.

Sellers: Did you make any friends or acquaintances that were wounded or injured while you were there with them?

Beller: Yeah, I did. I made a friend of mine, he was an interpreter. He was a German. He was in our outfit. They used him as an interpreter. He was in our outfit and, well, he got hurt by — they took a group of people to a dance on the truck and the truck overturned and then he became — he couldn't walk anymore.

Sellers: He was paralyzed?

Beller: He was paralyzed, yeah. So when we got home again, I looked him up. He was in Staten Island in a GI hospital there.

Sellers: So even though he was German, they brought him to this country?

Beller: No, he was German in the United States. He was a GI soldier. You know, he spoke German, like, spoke to a German.

Sellers: Okay, so he was interpreting.

Beller: Yeah, and he was Jewish also. They didn't seem to send in too many Jews into the combat area. Well, they tried not to anyway.

Sellers: When did you get sent back towards the United States? Did you go into one of the cigarette camps?

Beller: What's a cigarette camp?

Sellers: Well, when they first started using points and sending men back —

Beller: Oh yeah, yeah, yeah. We were getting ready to go to Japan at that time. They sent us —

Sellers: Yeah, that's where I was going. Where they going to send you on to Japan?

Beller: Yeah we went to Strasbourg — not to Strasbourg, to Marseilles, the port of exit, and then they dropped that — the atom bomb, and then that was it. We stayed in Germany. I didn't have quite enough points to come home, but that infantry division I joined was already in training for about a year, so they transferred me to another division with less points like, and then we came back.

Sellers: When did you get back?

Beller: The beginning of '46.

Sellers: Did you come back into New Jersey?

Beller: No, I don't know where we came back. We came back on the *Mariposa*. I don't know what kind of a boat that was, though. They called it the *Mariposa*. Came back in an awful storm. I didn't think we'd make it.

Sellers: Like a hurricane?

Beller: Well, it was a northern whatever-they-called it. One of those where you couldn't get out on the deck, hardly. Saw the waves breaking way over the boat.

Sellers: Did you get seasick that time?

Beller: Yeah, I think everybody did.

Sellers: But it didn't matter, because you were going the right direction this time. What do you remember most about your experience in the military and the war?

Beller: The wounded people. You know, we were right in the middle of all of them. Both the Germans and the GIs — and their smell. You know, we were right in the middle of it, and that was terrible. You know, you ever smell a dead person?

Sellers: No. Thank you, I hope I don't have to.

Beller: There was, like, not hundreds, but tens, almost hundreds of them, laying around at one point, you know, at the beginning when they landed. Both, you know, Germans and Americans, and that was kind of scary.

Sellers: So there were still lots and lots of bodies on the beaches when you came in?

Beller: No, they weren't hardly any on the beach, but just a little ways in, they were.

Sellers: Had they set up as a temporary morgue site or had they just gone on beyond them?

Beller: No, they left them. And then they had a graves registration where they picked them up and then loaded them onto the big two-by-four trucks and hauled them away from there. The Germans mostly buried them right where they could, right around the place.

Sellers: I wonder if the Germans ever came back for them?

Beller: No, they didn't.

Sellers: You don't think they did?

Beller: No. They were there maybe later. Somebody did though, because they were buried – some of them were buried right in some of the towns, or wherever, and they stuck a gun in the ground where they were and put a helmet on top of the gun and that was it. So somebody must have come by to do that, yeah. I wanted to go back again and see. Maybe I will one of these days, to where, to France, you know, and see the graveyard there and everything.

Sellers: So you do want to go back?

Beller: I'd like to see it. Yeah, I would. It's getting a little late though. I'm eighty-three already now [chuckling].

Sellers: But you still remember.

Beller: Oh yeah, I still remember.

Sellers: How do you think your experiences during World War II affected the rest of your life?

Beller: It didn't affect me at all.

Sellers: You don't think so?

Beller: I just forgot about it, and like now I just reminded myself — I told Mike that I went to bed and I thought of some stuff that I never even remembered, like the boats, you know, the boats we went on, the *Mariposa* and stuff.

Sellers: Yeah, an awful lot of people can't tell me the names of the boats that they were on, and you knew them.

Beller: Well, I remembered them after I woke up. They were in — they came to me.

Sellers: Okay, can you think of anything else that you want to put on the tape?

Beller: Just that war is hell.

Sellers: Yes.

Beller: I feel sorry for anybody that gets caught in it. When you're eighteen, it isn't that bad, but when I think about it now, you know, it's terrible.

Sellers: You're surprised that you were such a callous youth?

Beller: Yeah, I think I was.

End