

This interview is with Mr. James A. Robinson, a veteran of B Battery, 377th Parachute Field Artillery, 101st Airborne Division. This interview is being conducted at the 101st Airborne Division Reunion in San Antonio, Texas, the 9th of August 2001. The interview is being conducted by Scott Schoener and John O'Brian. Sir, could you please start off and tell us a little bit about how you came into the Army?

Mr. Robinson: In 1937, after finishing high school, I went for one month to citizen's military training camp. That is not so well known now, but it was supposedly if you went for different summers then you could possibly be commissioned. I found it wonderful training. The horses were great. The next year I joined the National Guard of Alabama, the 55th Calvary Brigade. I was with an engineer unit, motorized. Barely motorized in those depression times. I went on maneuver in 1938 with, I think, I am told 7,000 Calvary men at Fort Oglethorpe. I think shortly after they got rid of the horses, the Army was no better than I, when they got rid of the horses. Then I went down to Auburn in 1939. We had ROTC there and probably 75% was field artillery and the remaining engineer. I went through their program and went to seal and I applied immediately for Airborne Parachute. It took me some time to get accepted and I did go down to Benning. I went directly to Camp McCall which was a staging area for paratroopers. I was in chemical on D-Day. We were on maneuvers pulling these 75 pack Howitzer's with a harness, webbing. We had four people pulling the gun and a break man. I was assigned to D Battery, 377th, which was kind of a perimeter defense with a good number of machine guns. I had been a BAR man in the National Guard. We were asked to go over to Normandy and pipe in; I don't know what you call it. We had a communication man there to pipe in the planes flying up. We had this big flurry of activities. We were going to have another jump to fly it up and jump right on top of that thing.

Did you participate in the D-Day invasion?

Mr. Robinson: No, I did not. I was at Camp McCall during D-Day. We were headed out to go overseas. We went overseas on the Wakefield; the SS Wakefield and went in to Liverpool down to Darby, Bristol a day or two, and then into Newbury. The 377th was in Newbury. I did this _____ fiasco.

Did you prep for that mission in England?

Mr. Robinson: No, nothing. We just went.

How did you get across the channel?

Mr. Robinson: In a naval ship. As we came out, we couldn't come out promptly. We had to wait for the tide because it had gone up to far. I had a very large Sioux Indian called William Bill Moccasin. He and a good Irish boy called...I can't remember his name. This is one of the comical things that have happened of the 377th. They went overboard (AWOL) during the time that we were waiting to go out. After we got in Holland, they appeared. They had been decorated and done some great work with some armored division. The Colonel had to put them in quarters; confined them to quarters. Then it became apparent, "what in the hell are we doing with this slap happy Irish boy and this big Sioux Indian sitting in a Dutch house and we are carrying food to

them.” So he said, “Forget it all, come on back.” We shot artillery. The artillery situation in Holland was something Fort Sill would have liked to have been looking over my shoulder and of course got more out of it maybe than I did. It was a flat country. Between the rivers it was maybe twelve feet. It sounds ridiculous. I keep telling myself not to tell people that the real natural undulation and the difference in altitude are twelve feet. But it might be true. It was like a pool table. The Germans had high ground down river from Arnum in a _____ called Oosterbeek. They had guns there. They would shoot not necessarily Howitzer’s but 88’s, high velocity and just shoot. If a target of opportunity came they would shoot at you. Myself and my radio operator, we would be on the road and picking up batteries and trying to get back to our op and they would shoot right into us. We always had a rule Lubbock would take the left, pool the water, and I would take the right and we would escape.

I would like to ask you about your experiences when you first joined the 101st. Here is an outfit that had been through the Normandy Campaign before you got there. What was it like coming in as an officer into that organization?

Mr. Robinson: The first duty I had there was that I was given the duty to gather up the personal effects of the soldiers who had been lost in Normandy. Go through their things and if there were too many girlfriends’ pictures and they were married at home, we were discreet enough to kind of shut those aside. We would put their boots in their barracks bag and one uniform and ship them back to the states. I did this in a rose garden. Their happened to be a rose garden in the back of a house; a very large house that the 377th officers were occupying. My first duty I will never forget.

What was it like to fit in; you had a whole bunch of men in your battery that had experienced some combat. How did you come into that situation?

Mr. Robinson: Well all I can say is physically we rode the boat over and was trucked into that place. I don’t remember anything but the fact that we were....there was no incident where someone said to me, “Why the hell are you here? You are nothing.” I was 101st from the beginning.

In Holland you worked with the 502?

Mr. Robinson: I went to the deuce. That was my combat team at St. Oden Road and near Saint Oden Road to the south of Saint Oden Road there was, well there were flat places everywhere. We were resupplied there ammunition from England by air near the battery; maybe $\frac{3}{4}$ mile. I didn’t go and pick it up because I was the battery officer. But I knew that the shells were coming in. I was glad about it because you got to have the shells to shoot. The headquarters was in a castle there at Saint Oden Road. Company A CP was on the main road to Vagel. There was great effort to get to Vagel or get beyond Vagel; you know to get to the next bridge. They would close a road and we would open it again. Saint Oden Road was just south of these rivers. They split...the Rhine, you know double rivers. The Germans had what we would call scout cars and tanks there, off road, camouflage or whatever but mainly infantry. This was a matter of days. I would guess it might have been six or seven days there. Then I went to 301 which was in the, what we call in Alabama, squirmy times. It was hell to practice open warfare. Just immediately

across the river were these high velocity cannons shooting right down on them. That was Company A and Company C, I believe, of the 501. Captain Stach and Captain Phillips, somehow my memory doesn't give me who was A or who was C. I was with them and I got a small house looking immediately across the levee. The levee was the dyke and it had a road on top of it. Beyond that was a polder. The polder was the wetland, the tideland, what we called a slew but they called it polder. From that dyke to the river itself and beyond the river was Oosterbeek and down river was _____. The local town ferry; where the Germans were coming across on the ferry at night and getting in the apple orchards. As the British left and the Poles were almost destroyed and they left, these Germans took the opportunity to encroach and easily came across on the ferry and then digging in on the apple orchards. I took lookout on an op but not in the house, in the apple orchards and there had been a British major there and he had been killed. The thing that bugged me, a small matter, which in dying his glasses had been _____ and finally I said, "I can't stand this!" So I took his glasses and put them in his jacket, his leather jacket, and I put them away. The British don't pick up their dead like we do, so he had been there a few days. The Poles were everywhere. There were a good number of Poles. The hogs were eating the bodies, I'm not squeamish, I'm not worried about that, but it's not something we do. We get shot taking our dead away. I don't know what day it was, I didn't keep a diary. It was I think Phillips that decided that if I would stay in this house and shoot artillery because I could see from that point that he would withdraw all of his _____ because we were getting such pressure from the orchards, machine guns. If I would stay there and shoot, he would pull back. Sometimes down the road he would come back in. I guess I can say that I was new and I did it. I remember being something perhaps only a new man would do. We shot a great bunch of artillery and soon it becomes mute. I didn't know whose shells were what because they were shooting into us trying to liquidate and get their way. Of course I like to use the word finally, Phillips brought his people back. I was glad to have him come back. Before that I am upstairs in my op looking out the small little window over this dyke, just barely over the dyke, and I heard a noise. I said, "Well bubba, you've got your John Wayne coming up here" because there was so much tile, roofing tile, thrown down on the floor. I of course imagined it was some big hob-nailed enemy. I was carrying an M1 rather than a little pistol. I got to the stairway going up and all at once, being a farm boy, I heard this intruder grunt. I knew in a moment that some blasted sow, big sow, had come in the building. I remember them being so relieved to walk down a little way so I could see her. She was rooting on an image of, you have to help me here, the Mother Christ, and it was a ceramic thing. It was a ridiculous thing, an animal doing this to a sacred object. I couldn't dwell on that because I was so damn glad to know that it wasn't some hob-nailed fritz. I suppose that is enough of that. On one of the days there, Johnson was killed. He wasn't with this company; he wasn't nearby. It was somewhere there in the 501 area. Bottomly was, when I first reported into that battalion Bottomly had just been appointed commander of 1st bat. He was overly eager to be overly calm which was no time to be calm. He didn't convince me that he was calm. He tried to let me know that he was in command and said, "Jim, you have to get on up to the dyke." I went up to the dyke.

Do you have any recollections about the atmosphere; the morale of the troops when Colonel Johnson was killed and Colonel Ule took over? It was very different personalities when that happened.

Mr. Robinson: I read the same things you do about this matter. It is all of course a matter of record that Johnson was beloved and admired by the others. The ideal of swiping out his knife; he was a knife thrower. As he would go along in his jeep, he would throw his knife at fence post along the way and all that stuff which paratroopers liked to hear. I can't dwell on that. I read what you read. The last days of my active duty at Fort Bragg coming back was that all of us wanted to jump, I think 19, this open door jump.

C1-19?

Mr. Robinson: Yes. It had just come out. It was one that two lines jump out the back. We all wanted to do that. I went to Colonel Ule and I said, "Ule, I'm from the 101st, 377th, could you get me on the list. I would love to jump it." He said, "Robinson, there must be 200 people that want to do that every day." I went back to Alabama to my farm home without having jumped that double whammy thing. I was at Opheusden just as the 506th withdrew from there. We all know that the 506th had a horrible time. There is no need of me even going through it. The 327th and the 401st, the 401 was the added battalion of the 327. I was attached to them for the first time. We went there and one of the most intense frays I was in there was being about a 100 yards from the railroad station at Opheusden a little country railroad station. It was sited at a crossroads over a dyke and a railroad and a station is there. So the Germans had this lower elevation to assemble and to stay safely away from our artillery because of the depression there. They were there not only in that building which was concrete, but in that depression. We were 150 yards away eager to get them out of there. So I shot at them at that railroad station time and time again to get them out of there and I couldn't do it. Finally I thought to white phosphorus to try to burn it down and I couldn't do that. I went back at the 50th Anniversary and I found that the station is still there. I guess it was all a waste of time in a way. There was an instance there that is covered in the book on that Hell's Highway. There was a young man and we didn't know whether they were attacked or it was a frustrated attack, an avoided attack or inadequate attack on their part, but we were real close by. Some of them came near us and we beat them back and were able to bring so far in on them. One young man kept coming and all the doughboys said, "Kill him, kill him kill him!" So I thought, "No, no. Let him come because we can grab him and find out what in the hell is going on in that place." He ran right in to me. I had no other choice in all the excitement and I suppose I got too excited that I grabbed him by the throat and threw him down. I am a little man but he just laid there. He was glad to get the hell on the ground. After shooting once or twice I looked down and he was armed. I said, "Well let me change this." I was able to take his gun away. He went away as a prisoner and I never saw him again. This is just part of my amusement. I don't know what it means to artillerymen everywhere. We did get casualties there. They had a great lot of artillery. I want dwell on this because it is written that several people have said that this was the most intense; the British said that it was more intense than in the desert where they really did pound away on each other. I have no such experience to give that kind of comparison. All I know is that that was a great lot. They had given the 506th a great lot of injuries; a lot of fatalities and so forth. Somewhere in Holland I was assigned to Ranwieck and the main thing there is the church with a spiral. I headed for it and went all the way up and put some ____ and 110 wire right up to top of it. I had my radio operator at the bottom and this church belfry, the old part of the belfry had been kept, even though it was fairly modern as far as I know about construction. They must have kept it for folkloric reasons. I think the belfry may have been built in the 19th Century or so. It was thick like mad like three feet, four feet. When we would have a barrage

come in we would run and get in the basement and we cooked in there. I just made a habit of having one radio operator; not a big group of people. That is my strange way of operating. I think that if you have a lot of people around you are going to get seen more often. When we got in there the building wasn't harmed. They had a section for the children to sleep during prayers and extended services. The little infants would sleep on these pillows. I remember that and not more than a few days they knocked so many holes in the church; in the main roof, in the steeple and in the graveyard outside. They gauged it and blew it up, the tombstones and the flat covering the stones. From that steeple I was able to see Oosterbeek and to shoot in there and to shoot on barges that the enemy was using.

Sir, can you tell us a little bit about Bastogne?

Mr. Robinson: Yes, I arrived on this truck in the night, darkness and I was told to seek out Company A which had been my...

Company A of the 502nd?

Mr. Robinson: Yes, Company A, 502nd. I found them and we moved out to the general area of.... We were in ____ and we were near the back of ____ in reserves. Two or three times we went into a village that had a great lot of pressure on them as reserves. I guess it was the night of the 21st that we arrived to back up the unit about 2 o'clock in the morning and it was a wooded area. The story was that Company A did dig in. Digging in on a cold ground and rooted trees is not so easy so I opted to take my knife and cut off the cloaks that I could get off the frozen bodies. I could easily cut off the tails of them and wrap my feet and boots in that. I had just been given a special ____, Bill and I, mittens; especially for ____ and nobody else got them. It was wonderful material. It was almost like boxing gloves, very thick. I lay down with those covered things on my feet and covered my face. I got a good sleep. I woke in the morning _____. From there we marched into Champs. Swanson sent out patrol and found that the enemy was right down the road, down maybe a mile and a half from Champs. So that kind of curved our ricochet around to see where the enemy was. I was able to get an observation post which I covered there about 400 to 550 yards from the MLR. That is a bit far but that is where the hill was and that is where we could get. First I would like to say that Swanson was an unusual infantry commander. He appreciated artillery and he gave me a great lot of leeway to do what I, some potential that I might have to do. He was a great one to work with. I got to the point where I would make the overlays and show it to him because I was very impressed, especially in Champs of all the work that an infantry commander has to do; all personnel problems, all supply, when is the food coming, why is it late. But I found wonderful men to work with.

You were in Champs for a long time...

Mr. Robinson: I was six days in Company A and six days in Company C, Captain George Cody.

But during that time do you have any memories of Christmas in Bastogne or in Champs?

Mr. Robinson: Yes I have some memories. What specific would you like?

What would you like to share with us?

Mr. Robinson: Christmas night at 3:30 other people are running about this. I'm not I've been ____; all I know is that it came in. It hit the fan, big shells and a lot of them. I know what the artillery on the other side was doing, they were on target. They hit Swanson's cp, right on top and just tore the beams out. I was occupying an upstairs room but I happened not to be there when the biggest one hit. It blew a great lot of duck feathers out, goose feathers or something, all over the house. Apparently they had goose feathers stored up there. As far as I know, communications were cut to the platoons. We are in the dead of night with no how to command, how to direct, how to collaborate, how to do. Of course it is a matter of records, the enemy came in and burned I think two platoons. I will leave that up to the infantrymen to say how many platoon headquarters were burned. I had some things to do myself. We had a fire plan and we fired this artillery as we could in the dark. We shot on the Champs Ruet road. That is the main drag and that main drag went back to Regimental headquarters. It goes through the town, go north and that first town out is Ruet. It was a paved, Ruet road. Sergeant Lou Milano had a roadblock there of timbers and so forth. I collaborated with him by adding a concentration right there and that was the platoon on the right; right flank of Champs. Of course it is a matter of record, the 500 enemy swept through the town. Of course I began near dawn to move where I might see the outer ridges, meaning the north part of town. That was my thing, not to stay in headquarters. A problem arose in that the op had been swept clean, my op, the 400-500 yards op up on the hill. All of us were concerned what had happened to our men. Was there still a hill there or what? I was eager to get the op back and I conferred with him and he said for us to wait. Then he got a German speaking soldier, Haufman. I don't know how to spell it because I never saw it. He sent Haufman up because the Germans had put out a white flag. We were all saying to ourselves, "Those sons-of-bitches, are they really wanting to surrender or are they playing with us?" There was kind of a low but who in the hell knows that it is a low or what. Wally wanted to wait until Haufman could go up and do his thing. "Is there a hospital here? Are people injured? Are they laying here half dead? Do you really want to give up?" We were all waiting for that in great concern. The infantrymen were along the MLR and my usual route is upper card road so I was at my cart ready to go. I was beside myself almost. Finally Wally said, "We shoot because Haufman hasn't come back. If he is captured or dead or whatever we have got, you know." Then I was given battalion full valise. It was a happy time for me because while being at that op it had a concentration right in front of it. Obviously you are going to use your own arm to protect yourself if you are going to be there in the middle of the damn night. I had been there several nights. It was just that night that Wally and I decided that things looked just too bad; you come and stay with me tonight; meaning at the company cp. I had this concentration about 50 yards in front of our op looking at the Germans in front of the forest. All I did was just draw it back. I guess we got about 48 rounds time fire right in on it. Before that I could see two people and I assumed they were veteran sergeants of the German Army standing out in the snow in front of my observation. We didn't have ammunition that shot like hell. You know what I mean? We were ____ stuff out. We shot other rounds at that and on the way back down the hill I heard this God awful blast. It was a sound different from usual. It was this lone tank, Christmas morning and it was trying to get back to its own line. You read about it in the paper there. The tank that was coming from the attack on headquarters on 502 up that road on the way to Ruet and through town. It got to the village and headed out to the open space. It is written there that bazookas hit the exhaust and blew it up. I was coming back down this hill and I heard all this damn stuff. I

looked over and saw this smoke and I heard continued noise. I looked at the MLR and one of the boys that I knew well, he had his hands in the air happier than hell. I said, "God almighty he has gone mad. I got to go down and do my duties." I thought it was our tank. But it was that one lone tank being blown up. I became quite enthused myself at that time. To get up that hill, I told Wally that I had killed three Germans. But it wasn't really true. I found more than three there and they were all laying prone in these great horse carts; two-wheeled that they dig in and this erosion had made two big ruts. There was brush on both sides; shrubs I wasn't digging out anything. All I knew was that there were Germans there and they were alive and I didn't expect it. I shot all that I had. I had two clips. I went back to the radio operator that I told to hold back. I got another clip and I said to him, "Come on Dawson, let's go." He went up with me and he saw this gory mess. I shot some more before I went up to this hill. This gory mess was too much for him, he vomited. He was a great boy and he knew the radio in and out, I hate to put on record that he is dead now, but he got sick. I say this because Bando has written about this matter and he has written it not in sequence. It was written as if I shot these people to get these medals. He has me casually, later, shooting the 48 rounds. He just published a book, "Trigger Time". I like Bando, he works hard. But I regret the fact that he is emphasizing the gory aspects rather than some of the sequence that a good F.O ought to do. Christmas Day and that to me to look over and see that lone tank being blown up by Ballard and Fowler. Fowler took the place of Acey. Acey is here in town today. Do you know about him, Acey, Company A. He was a good man. He was wounded there. He was in such bad shape that they got him out and they thought he was a German. He was laying in a coma down in France someplace. He heard all these German voices once he woke up. He said to the nurse, "What in the hell is going on?" She said, "You are in a hospital." They got him on a gurney and got him out. He said to me yesterday, "Get me the hell out of there and to my people!" Ok Christmas Day, what do you want to ask? I have to get some help. I think B came in and we were able to put some fire on that op. After my firing we didn't say, "Hey this is a celebration, let's have fun and run up to the mountain." Good God no because 450 yards in an open snow field when you could be observed from a thousand or more yards on your flank, you don't do it you know.

Christmas Day was a day of combat for you?

Mr. Robinson: Yes, that is putting it lightly. I had an unfortunate thing happen to me. I saved my firing maps and I have reconstructed those from memory because I can't forget Champs. My actual firing maps were lost in my father's home. It burned when I was overseas. I tried to reconstruct them for Layton Blacks book as much as I could on his book by telephone and so forth.

Was there anything that we haven't asked you about that you would like to add; about anything in general?

Mr. Robinson: In the last attack when the 502 was, in layman's terms, jammed together and given one commander as if it was a battalion, we attacked toward Bersee along the railroad. Company A was down to maybe 28 people on their feet. Harrison, Wally Swanson's assistant Lieutenant, took those 28 people across a high railroad embankment. He would go back and forth taking them across. He would take them across into a wooded area to flush out tanks. Of course I knew them well and I had to stay with the main so called battalion. That was a sad time

for me. It was a gallant thing to do to take those people there. Down the track was a heavy machine gun on the tank. The German tanks carry a 50. They are different from the one used by the infantrymen. They were shooting right down that railroad. He got them all across. Another time we were in the trees on the way to Bersee and we got a great lot of artillery fire on us in an open field. I'm sure Fort Benning would have said, "You broke discipline." Not me but all of us. Instead of continuing on across that open field, we pretty much rushed to a wooded area and we got tree burst. One of the boys sitting next to me on the ground, he hit his leg and broke it in maybe two or three places. This muscle, calf, was blue like my mother used to butcher chickens on a farm. It seemed like the concussion had knocked the blood out of where it was bleeding but it was blue. He said to me, "Lieutenant, I lost my leg." I said, "You will grow another you son-of-a bitch." I'm quite sorry but my memory is one of the few things I think I fail to remember this man's name. He wasn't from the deuce, I researched that. I would like to run him down and see him sometimes. That was on the attack to Bersee. I remember very well when we were called back from that attack. Lieutenant Graves was in Company A. It seems that the Germans were just unloading all of their supplies of ammunition, shooting at us. We were going beyond Bersee and Grave got hit. He was a massive fellow. He got hit in the butt and he was bleeding like mad. Of course he was telling me, "I've lost my manhood. Oh God Jim I have lost my manhood." He was taking it hard. Of course I am telling him that it wasn't true at all. We made a makeshift stretcher out of two guns and plopped him on it. I weighed 144 lbs. and I had my end and somebody else had his end and off we went. Just then a meat wagon came by and we were able to dump him in that meat wagon. That was my end of Bastogne.

Well thank you very much!

Mr. Robinson: I am taking a lot of time; I'm sorry about it.

That's ok.

(Tape ends)