

Second Interview--World War II Veteran

James E. Bryant

[REDACTED]
Born December 24, 1924, Southampton, VA
Religious background: Protestant

Date of Interview: October 5, 2006
Conducted by Marcia Horn

Location: [REDACTED] Daleville, VA
Videographer: Alan Gleiner

Landed in Normandy, Utah Beach, June 6, 1944
2nd Battalion, 325th Glider Infantry Division, 82nd Airborne
Silver Star, Bronze Star with Oak Leaf Cluster, European-North African Campaign
Medal with bronze arrowheads and 4 battle stars, Glider Wings with 2 bronze stars,
among others
Author of *Flying Coffins Over Europe* (Appomattox: H.E. Howard, 2003)

James Bryant has dedicated most of his life to the military. He presently volunteers at the D-Day Memorial in Bedford, VA. At 18 he was drafted as a private into the infantry in Norfolk and then moved outside Durham, receiving overall training for about a year. In early 1944, he spent 8-10 weeks in Camp Pickett, outside Blackstone, and in April he was sent to camp Miles Standish, outside Boston. He was then shipped overseas to Liverpool, England. When there was a need for men to volunteer for the glider regiment, James signed on to the 325th glider infantry. He trained on gliders 2-3 weeks, apart from the rest of his unit. Once alerted, he moved to the airfield for the Normandy invasion, landing June 6-7, 1944. His task was dangerous; the glider he flew was a one-time-use plane, loaded with 5-gallon cans of gas. Fortunately, he landed safely between two clumps of trees. For this, he earned his first wings and extra pay. Later he went to "jump school" and became a paratrooper in Normandy.

At age 19, in mid-December 1944, in the midst of snow and fog during the beginning of the Battle of the Bulge, James Bryant had his closest brush with death. His platoon was told to seek an isolated crossroads near Bastogne, Belgium, and they came under heavy fire from the Germans. He had been ordered to find a jeep and supply ammunition to his company. However, the Germans killed the jeep's driver, and James, sitting next to him, rolled out of the jeep and started crawling back towards the crossroads. American GIs, thinking he was the enemy, began shooting at him. He crawled back to the woods and covered himself with leaves, barely camouflaging himself in time to avoid a German patrol passing nearby. The next morning, he returned to the 82nd Airborne, which had suffered severe casualties. Ten days later his unit was relieved by 100 replacements. Given some time for rest, James and his

regiment went to the town of Pepinster, in Belgium. He remembers well the hospitality of the Dolne family, and especially their son Alphonse, a teacher, who was especially kind and spoke good English. This visit made such an impression that James has kept in touch over the years and visited family members in April 2006.

In March 1945, the First Sergeant of James's company suddenly returned to the U.S. and, to his surprise, James was promoted to First Sergeant at age 20 and had his own jeep. Later that spring, his company was crossing the Elbe from Cologne and was heading toward Ludwigslust. Fleeing the Russians, the German army (144,000) surrendered to the 82nd Airborne. The 82nd took Ludwigslust and prepared to wait for the Russians. At this time his unit learned of a nearby concentration camp in the village of Wobbelin. This discovery made one of the deepest impressions of James' wartime memories.

Wobbelin was a concentration camp, a satellite camp of Bergen-Belsen, consisting of 5,000-6,000 slave laborers from different countries. About 1,000 were already dead when James and his company arrived. He didn't think any were Jews. The mayor of Ludwigslust and the Germans said they "didn't know" about the camp, but James remembers the stench. Ignorance was impossible. James's commander required all of the civilians to view the dead and to bury them in the town's palace grounds.* All GI's were also required to see the dead. Some couldn't take the smell. James commented, "You just couldn't see how one human could do this to another. This made us all realize at that point why we had fought the war." Years later James wondered if the bodies were still buried there. In 1994 he revisited Ludwigslust and Wobbelin. The bodies were still buried there, and the Germans had been required to erect a memorial to the dead. (See also the Ninth Interview—Jesse Oxendine's account of Wobbelin.)

James returned to the U.S. in October 1945. He was not yet 21. Later he reenlisted in the 82nd Airborne at Fort Bragg, NC, and subsequently served in the Korean War and other army commitments.

When asked about the effect of his wartime experiences on his world view of politics, James commented that if "we had fought World War II like we're fighting in Iraq, we'd still be fighting." When he reflects on his war experience, he said he always felt he would make it. (Some others he knew felt they wouldn't, and often they didn't.) If someone were to tell him the Holocaust hadn't happened, he would be "a little bit upset." One final lesson he said we should learn from remembering World War II is "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

*(See pictures at the end of the interview on DVD. Some background material in the last part of this account came from the back cover of *Flying Coffins Over Europe*. At the end of the interview, James inscribed a copy of his book and presented it as a gift.)