

Interviewee: Douglass, Billy A., Sr.
Interviewer: Kevin McCranie
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McCranie: Are you aware that we are recording this conversation?

Douglass: Yes, I am.

McCranie: And do we have your permission to do this?

Douglass: Yes, you do.

McCranie: You said you had a statement to make – would you like to go ahead with that?

Douglass: Yes, if you don't mind. Last summer, visiting with my son-in-law, our talks turned to our war experiences. He is a forgotten Korean War vet and I a World War II survivor. During our conversation, his eight-year-old daughter joined in and asked, "Grandpa, what did you do in the war?" I passed off her comment about doing a lot of traveling and that seemed to satisfy her, but it started me to do a lot of thinking also. So I asked my seventeen-year-old grandson if they taught anything of the war in high school. I was quite surprised – he was in doubt as to who the enemies had been. This past fall the fiasco with the Florida balloting situation, the longer it progressed, the more frustrated I became. Finally in a fit of despair, I wrote a letter to the editor of the local paper, and it was a pretty facetious letter berating the balloting situation, the dimples and the shards and so on, but in part I said that I had served with

General Patton through Europe in World War II and was wondering if our efforts had been in vain. So it was pretty bitter. As a result, to my surprise it got published, and the same day I received a call from a member of the local Elks lodge asking if I'd be interested in being a guest speaker at their next luncheon. Well, it just so happened that luncheon fell on the sixtieth anniversary of Pearl Harbor, and I spoke for about a half hour. As I spoke, memories that had lain dormant in my memory bank for over sixty years came flooding back. I received a very gratifying standing ovation and a gentleman at the head table said, "Sir, that's the first standing ovation a guest speaker has ever received at this lodge that I'm aware of." So as I was leaving, several of the members of the lodge stopped me and asked questions and I ended up staying there for nearly an hour. As it turned out, most of them had been just small children or some hadn't even been born. It was a very gratifying experience. Now as the media keeps reminding us, the World War II vets are passing away at a rate of over about 1,000 a day, and soon we'll be a forgotten generation. The only permanent reminder of World War II that I'm familiar with is the National D-Day Museum created by Dr. Stephen Ambrose in New Orleans. I have in my mind that I may try to put all this on paper some day, and if it's discovered years later, maybe remind the reader why this great country of ours is not speaking German or Japanese. And that's where I'm at right now.

McCranie: [comments on the purpose of the oral history program not transcribed] Could you tell me a little bit about when and where you were born?

Douglass: I was born in a small farm house in northern Illinois near a little town called Hillsdale, which was about 150 people. In those days ... I'm seventy-seven years old ... in those days our doctor, who was in another town, a neighboring town of Geneseo, which was about twenty miles away, and he traveled by horse and buggy. So I was born without the assistance of any professional help of any kind. I went to a small one-room grade school. I can't recall how one teacher managed to handle eight grades and all the subjects that we took. I can't feature how she did it. Anyway, I managed to get through grade school, entered a community high school at

Hillsdale, Illinois. There were twelve kids in my class – my freshman class – eight girls and four boys. I think the maximum enrollment at any one time was about seventy, and the twelve of us went through four years intact. After high school I started driving a truck and of course registered for the draft, and then was eventually drafted into the service.

McCranie: And what year were you born, sir?

Douglass: 1924. April 12, 1924.

McCranie: Did you enter the service before or after Pearl Harbor?

Douglass: After.

McCranie: Can you tell me where you were when you heard about the attack?

Douglass: I was in school – in high school. In fact, that's the year I graduated.

McCranie: What was your reaction to the attack?

Douglass: Quite surprised. Very surprised. And wanting to join the service that day.

McCranie: What stopped you from joining the service that day?

Douglass: I really can't recall. I don't know what the situation was except possibly I didn't have any transportation to get to where it was available.

McCranie: Had you been keeping up with world events prior to the attack?

Douglass: To the best of my memory, I'd say yes.

McCranie: So you knew that the Germans and the Japanese had been acting up a little bit.

Douglass: Oh, yes.

McCranie: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

Douglass: I had two sisters younger than I – one, one year younger and one, two years younger.

McCranie: What year were you finally drafted?

Douglass: In May of 1943.

McCranie: So you were basically a civilian for the first year and a half of the war.

Douglass: Right.

McCranie: Did you notice life changing? What you could get at the store or anything like that before you entered the service?

Douglass: I cannot recall anything such as gas rationing or grocery rationing or anything of that effect. I know it was in existence, but I can't recall it for some reason.

McCranie: You were drafted in May of '43. What was your family's reaction to that, your going off to serve?

Douglass: There's another little story with that, if you don't mind. I'd just made nineteen, I was driving a truck in and around northern Illinois, hauling war-related materials, most of them of an urgent nature. I stopped by home one day and my mother had just received a postcard from the Selective Service board. On the card it informed her that they had received word that I had enlisted and they wanted to know what branch of the service and when. So the draft board was in a neighboring town and I borrowed Dad's car and went over there immediately. As I entered, it was a group of seniors and they were an unsmiling lot. When I introduced myself and told them why I was there, I soon gained the impression I was public enemy number one. They were very unsmiling and not very nice. I was directed on to a small office in the back of the board building and read the riot act again by a gentleman back there who provided me with a government issued bus ticket and told me to be on a bus that night to the induction center. Needless to say, I was on the bus that night. That was May 16. The next morning, May 17, I was at the Camp Grant induction center near Rockford, Illinois, and I was in the Army.

McCranie: Why were they so unsmiling to when you first walked in the door? Any idea?

Douglass: I don't know unless they thought I'd been trying to pull something to evade the draft. I don't know where they got the information from that I'd enlisted; that was a puzzle. I never did find out.

McCranie: Did you have time to go back home before you caught the bus?

Douglass: Yeah, I went back home from the draft board, packed a small bag, and my dad took me to the quad cities about twenty miles from the little town they lived in. And that's where I caught the bus to the induction center.

McCranie: That didn't give you much time to say goodbye, did it?

Douglass: It sure didn't. They were making up for lost time on my part.

McCranie: You leave a girlfriend behind?

Douglass: Not really.

McCranie: You said you were driving a truck prior to your enlistment. What type of war-related materials were you carrying and where were you taking these things?

Douglass: Most of it I wasn't aware of. It was generally put in the trailer and sealed. And in those days a semi-trailer, if it was eighteen to twenty foot long, was a monstrous thing. It's nothing like these forty-five and fifty footers they pull nowadays.

McCranie: And where were you carrying the stuff back and forth between?

Douglass: Normally out of the Chicago area to the quad cities – Moline, Rock Island, Davenport, Iowa.

McCranie: What was your first taste of military life once you arrived after your bus ride?

Douglass: At the induction center? That next morning when I was sworn in, they issued us our military clothing, our dogtags. We took a battery of tests to determine what your qualifications would be, but spent most of the day taking physicals. Having been born with amblyopia (that's a non-functioning right eye), I became a reason for serious discussion among some doctors, and they finally determined that I would be acceptable for limited service. All of my papers and my service record were stamped in big large red letters: LIMITED SERVICE.

McCranie: And what does "limited service" entitle you to?