

Blaine W. Betenson
Cedar City Library Veterans' History Project
Interviewed by: Bryce and Shelly Goodwin
Date: 2006
Final Edit: November 2010
Mr. Betenson was accompanied by with wife, Shirley

Q: If you will begin by stating and spelling your full name.

A: My full name is Blaine Webster Betenson.

Q: Ok.

A: A long time resident of Cedar City. I've lived here all my life.

Q: Your whole life?

A: All my life.

Q: Ok and so this is where you lived when you were...Did you enlist or were you drafted?

A: Well actually I was drafted when I was still a junior in high school, but when I went through the physical at Fort Douglas in Salt Lake City, the Captain that interviewed me right at the end said, "Well I see you haven't graduated from high school yet" and this was in 1945 and I said "that's right I've still got one more year to go". And he said "would you like to finish school?" and I said "yes". He says "you are a little under weight when you are home eat a lot and gain a little weight and we will bring you back next spring." That was in May of forty-five.

Q: How much do you think you weighed?

A: Oh probably about 130-140 pounds at that time. When I first went in to high school I weighed 118 pounds so.

Q: That's about where I am at right now.

A: Any way so I went back up again in May of forty-six as we graduated that May from high school. And they put me at 1A ready to go into the service and one of my...I went to work out to Bryce Canyon, where I had been working at for three years...at Bryce in the summer time. They called one of my good friends that lived here in town on the draft board and said you and Blaine are going to be the next two guys drafted. We both had birthdays in...mine was September and his was in October. So he came out to Bryce and told me about it and we decided that we would join. They had a recruitment program on at that time. There was soldiers that were over seas that had their length of time in, they were eligible to come home, but they didn't have anybody to replace them. There were occupational courses over both in Germany and in Japan and Korea. So we decided to join. They gave us an incentive that if you could join for eighteen months you get the full GI bill and they would give us just a short basic training and then they would send us

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over seas. So I...we joined. There was quite a few of us that was here in Cedar that joined.

Q: And what branch did you...what branch was it?

A: It was the army. We ended up back in Fort Douglas...excuse me Fort Knox, Kentucky, Fort Knox, Kentucky. There was a big training area there just outside of Lewisville, Kentucky. We went through our basic training which is only four weeks then they started sending us over seas. They wanted to get us over seas so the soldiers could have time to get home for Christmas. And while we were in basic training why they started calling different ones up from the camp there that they thought would fit into some of the requirements that they were calling for at that time. I had played the drums the snare drums through junior high and high school so they sent me to band school. [Interviewer: Wow.] And I wasn't able to go over seas which I was quite disappointed. I was looking forward to it but all by buddies and and the whole the whole company left to go over seas.

Q: So you weren't in combat positions?

A: No. We were going through basic training as infantrymen we went through the training for firing range, went through the gas chamber, and did a lot of the training but it was kind of accelerated and shortened. So after they left, they left about Thanksgiving time or just a little after to head over seas and I stayed there at Fort Knox and went to band school and after about the first week in band school, we were out on the parade ground. Every time they had a graduation from Fort Knox we were out and led the parade through the Board of Review and marched and played on the parade ground there. They sent me along with about twelve others to Fort McPherson, Georgia which is just out just on the out skirts of Atlanta. Right now it is right in the middle of Atlanta. [Laughing] We went down there about three or four years ago and everything had changed of course there were no freeways down there at that time and now it is just massive freeways and high-rises. Anyway I was stationed there and it was the Nineteenth Special Service Group where I was stationed and low and behold they had a dance band and entertainment band and stuff for the fort.

Q: So what instrument did you play again?

A: The drums, but I had never played dance band drums.

Q: There are different kinds?

A: Well dance band is where you are up and you've got the bass drum, the symbols and the snare drum and the different tom-toms and like that. Anyways I...they were in the

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band and really there wasn't much for me to do. So they made me the Motor Sergeant and a mail clerk. And that's what I started out doing with the band there. And we also set up recreation fields for the soldiers that were coming back from overseas. It took them a few days for them to get discharged and all their paperwork done and that. And we set up all the fields [perhaps "on the ball fields"] and entertainment for them and that's kind of where we got started that way. Fortunately I happened to make Third Army Basketball team.

Q: Wow, yeah I've played basketball.

A: And we really enjoyed that. You got to tryout.

Q: There's tryouts for basketball in the Army?

A: Each group or Army base had a team.

Q: Oh ok.

A: We were in the...we were headquarters for third army at that time. It had come over seas it was Patton's Army. It was over in Europe.

Q: Did you know Patton? Did you ever?

A: No. No.

Q: Ok.

A: We went down there to Fort McPherson and like you say, three or four years ago and I'd changed basically changed around the time when I was there why they had a lot of the wooden barracks and like that around there and build up, but that all had been gone. They still had the old parade ground and the officer quarters and the mess hall and stuff like that that's down and around the base, but as far as the clear out in the woodlands you might say they had the old wooden barracks. They were all gone. Like I say, I had well just about nine months before we got discharged, they deactivated the Nineteenth Special Service Group and made us the 256th Army Band. And that's when the Third Army actually came back in to Fort McPherson and it was made officially the Third Army Headquarters. We had the opportunity to travel...by that time I got back in with playing the drums, playing the drums. And we got back in and we went up to Greeneville, Tennessee to dedicate a new armory that was up there. And you probably wouldn't remember anything about, there was a World War I famous man Sergeant York, in fact they made a movie of him years ago and it was with...oh what was his name...

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Q: I remember it.

A: You wonder about our old famous...

Q: Gary Cooper?

A: Gary Cooper.

Q: Yeah.

A: Gary Cooper was Sergeant York. Anyways, we went up to Greeneville, Tennessee and Sergeant York was there, but he was an older man and he didn't speak. He was just an honorary deal and we played a parade, played that afternoon, they had a dedication of the Armory and they had a dance and the next day while we got on the bus we went back to Atlanta. So I did get some of the experiences that I more or less trained for at the time.

Q: And what years was this when you were serving?

A: I went in 1946 or September of 1946 and we got out in March of 1948.

Q: Oh ok.

A: Like I say I had a lot of good experiences traveling all over the south, but mostly it was with the basketball team. Just prior to coming home, they started a recruiting program and it was called the Freedom Train. And the Freedom Train left Washington, D.C. It was...oh it was probably about nine cars long. And they had all kinds of displays and things going back and forth from World War I on up through World War II and things and they were coming into different bases and like they came into Atlanta which they were going to be there for two or three days. Our band was out on the...what do you call the area where the train pulls in?

Q: The depot, the station, the station, the depot. [Shirley and Shelly answering]

A: The depot. They pulled in there and we played while the band came in and then they took off and left to go to...it wasn't that same day, but they took off and was going to go down into Florida and at that time is when I got discharged, so I only participated it the one that they played there and that so.

Q: So now you say that your brothers were in too, so were you all gone at once?

A: They had both came home before I went home.

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Q: So your poor mother.

A: [Shirley] Well his brothers were nine and eleven years older than him.

A: They used to...during World War II they had for veterans came out, they had a star that would go in the window and my mother had the two stars but by the time I got in why they had done away with that.

A: [Shirley] His one brother was a prisoner of war in Germany for a year and a half.

Q: Really. And then your mother still let you go huh?

A: Yeah [Laughing]

Q: I don't know. I don't know.

A: But it was a great experience. The little interview I did the little girl from the college, she asked me what I really thought the benefits that I received by going into the service. And I told her that I realized that I needed more education than I had just out of high school. And, of course, this GI bill that provided me with the funds to go.

Q: So did you go to college after...

A: Yes. I went to college, graduated down here with an Associate Degree along with a industrial technology degree, an auto mechanic. It took me three years to get through that.

Q: What else do you thing your service taught you?

A: Discipline, taught me to...well I was with a real good bunch of guys. I remember one of the orientations that we had when we first got in the service they had a whole bunch of us there and this one captain got up and he says "one thing I can tell about you guys" he says "you are either going to be a bit more advanced along in life or a little bit maybe falling a little bit further behind. It depends on that road you are taking right now". And I believed that. There were some guys that just as soon as they got away from home and got out and especially going to Fort Knox, Kentucky was quite known for the highlife from like that the guys went in it down. But my Army experience of course was really great in the band and all of it like that. All of the guys were pretty much well I said, if you go to high school and you go to band you don't find very many of the rowdy guys, the ones that they are there to get an education in school and that's kind of what developed right into the army band and like that. They were all good class guys, I really enjoyed them.

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Q: So you've probably met people from all over the country.

A: Yes. Yes. One of my best friends was from St. Paul, Minnesota. I had a guy from Pennsylvania. We were working out, my wife and I was working out to Bryce a year, a year after we had got discharged and long behold here come one of my real close friends from Ohio. Came out there and I'd gone home with him at Christmas time up into Ohio because it was too far for me to come clear out here for Christmas.

Q: What would you was the most vivid memory of your service that you had?

A: I'll tell you one thing that really impressed me. I was just a little old [Cub Cheeper] right here, hadn't hardly been to any place. Had gone through the depression, gone into the war, the gas rationing was on, you just didn't go any place; I'd never been to Vegas. I'd been to Salt Lake and of course I'd worked over to Bryce. And that was about the limit of traveling. We were in a troop train coming from California to Fort Knox, Kentucky. We pulled in early in the morning into siding there in St. Lewis, Missouri. And I raised the curtain up and looked out and there the Mississippi River was and there was tug boats like going up and down the river. What an experience, what a...I laid there we were there for quite a while. They were getting things ready for the...in the train for their meals and things like that to go on to Fort Knox. But seeing those tug boats and that going up the river and that was really an experience for me. And then of course going into Atlanta and all the opportunities we had there I went to what they called cyclorama there in Atlanta that you picked the Battle of Atlanta and it was a big round place that you stood there and circled around and told the history all the way around. In fact my wife and I, Shirley and I had a chance to go see that. I apologize for my voice I had a little bit of health problems the last little while and my mouth's awful dry.

Q: Do you need to get a drink?

[Shirley] Do you want me to get you a drink?

A: Well maybe you can...

Q: And if you could give advice to the service men and women of today what would it be?

A: Well I understand the service is a lot different now than it was when I went in. I understand...I never knew anything about any kind of drug programs or anything like that. But I understand that they do have some problems that way. My advice is to just stick to your that ways you were raised, grew up in the atmosphere that you was there and try to keep your standards. Try to take full advantage of the experiences that you have and just hope that some day you won't get into harms way. I didn't have any worry about that at the time because the war was over. I still got a couple of medals, one was a

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freedom one and one was a...was a...[Shirley "good conduct"]...good conduct medal which was just come out and while we were in formation there they handed to us. It wasn't like getting wounded or anything like that.

Q: I think it is a very interesting story. I didn't know they did that, have you go into bands and stuff but it makes sense because you hear, they are famous bands.

A: [Shirley] That's true and they were trying to orient the soldiers coming back to when they were...wanting them to be welcomed home and...

Q: Well I don't thing anything brings patriotism like a band.

A: [Shirley] Absolutely.

Q: Nothing

A: [Shirley] Absolutely.

Q: There is nothing that brings a patriotic feeling like a good band.

A: [Shirley] No they bring tears to your eyes.

A: Will you get my plaque right there honey so I can bring some...Shirley has done really well, I've got a scrapbook and just this little thing she is going to bring in now, she took a lot of things that was just here in this drawer and that drawer and what not and she made it into a...

Q: She kept a scrapbook of all your medals and stuff?

A: I put them right here.

Q: Ok. Isn't that priceless for your kids? Stand up and fix it and see. [Showing wall plaque]

A: [Shirley] That shows the...

A: That's the headquarters, Fort McPherson and why don't you read that right there to them Shirley.

A: [Shirley reads from plaque] It says, its name Fort McPherson is named for Major General James Birds Eye McPherson US Army the Union Commander of the Army during the battle of Atlanta. This area was used as a state militia drill ground as early as 1833.

Q: Wow that's cool.

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A: [Shirley continues reading] It housed several temporary confederate and union military encampments. And now it is established at the Third Army Headquarters.

Q: That's really neat. Now that's your medals? Is that the patch that was on your shoulder?

A: Yes, this was the same as a sergeant only it was in a technical grade. It was a T4. And then of course that was me. I was standing in front of the old Nineteenth Special Service Company. And these are the two medals and that was my expert in riflmanship and discharge and dog tag the pictures here and this was either...I was a mail clerk and motor sergeant and that was it.

Q: Wow that was cool. [Plaque put away]...So do you have any regrets about your service?

A: Oh I don't know that I have any regrets, I kind of wanted to go over seas and see the world you might say but looking back, I thought I was I think I was really lucky to have participate and do the things I was able to do.

Q: Yep you are blessed. How do you feel about the current conflict in Iraq?

A: I have real mixed emotions, real mixed emotions. I really wish that they could have just gone through and I think what the President and other officers or military people thought it was just going to go in and be done with. But it's not really a war. It's a conflict that we've got to handle it someway but I don't know the full answer to it. I thoroughly support the government, the military, but I wish they could have had a more successful end and I just don't know. I'd never speak against it, but on the other hand I just kind of hear there are some gray areas there that they wont quite...I wish it was different.

Q: Did you know her (Shirley) when you went to war or you met after?

A: [Shirley] We met after.

A: She is from Tropic and worked there at Bryce Canyon and when I came I'd worked out to Bryce three years before I went into service in fact the only thing opened at Bryce at that time was the cafeteria. And so when I came home why she was...she'd graduated from high school and was working there at the cafeteria and at that time I was working as a power plant which I had done prior to going in. And we met and got married at the end of that summer after...October 1948.

Q: Did you want to say anything else? Talk about your brothers or just your service any more? What would you like to follow up with?

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A: I'd like to just mention my two brothers. I get awful emotional. My brother Howard, had joined the Guard back in about 1934. One thing it was a means of having a little bit of money. And he had worked himself up until he was a First Sergeant of the group here in Cedar. They were activated in... March or...no probably January of 1941. And they were sent to San Luis Obispo in California.

Q: Do you remember that?

A: Oh yes. You bet I remember. There was quite a doings with the guard going and like that it's just the same as it was now. They was just ready to ship out of San Francisco when Pearl Harbor broke out the next December. And so they rerouted them and they went back down into the south and around and did more training and ended up going into DE or D-Day and they were with Patton's Army there and he didn't get home until 1945. So he just passed away last July, July 30th...

Q: I bet that was a scary time for your family wasn't it?

A: Yes. Of course during that time he was there. My second brother Francis had graduated from Utah State and he was working in Salt Lake in an accounting firm. And he was going to be drafted so he joined and got in the Air Force. And he was on the first daylight raid of Berlin in B17s when he was shot down.

Q: Was he a pilot?

A: He was a co-pilot. And he spent about fifteen months in the German Prison Camp and come home almost skin and bones. When he came home from the service, there was an election going on here in town and he needed a new...clerk... [Shirley is helping him to think of word]...it was a city treasurer I guess it was. Anyway he ran unopposed.

Q: Now when they are in prison, do you hear from them? Do you know where they are?

A: Well, I had just got home from the Basketball tournament up in Salt Lake City late Saturday night. I was sleeping in the next morning. Sunday morning, and the Bishop and the sheriff came and knocked on my mother's door and told her that he was shot down and they didn't know his outcome or anything at that time, but he was missing in action. And I was out on the football field or the track in May this was in March and I in May I...one of the girls there at the office at high school, my mother had called told her that he was...that he was in a prison camp they had...the Red Cross had sent word that he was a prisoner of war. Up on the Stalag-13 that's up on the Baltic Sea there where *Hogan's Heroes* were [laughing].

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Q: So you did you, you didn't know between that time though if he was...

A: No we didn't know at that time. We didn't know if he was alright or what had taken place. But he came home skin and bones which you know he ended up being probably the healthiest ones of the group.

A: [Shirley] Very very healthy, it was surprising.

Q: See I did, I don't know that I knew that he was a prisoner of war and I thought I knew him pretty good.

A: [Shirley] He never talked about it until his later years.

A: Shirley, why don't you get that one that a little girl wrote up?

Q: So he didn't write to you or anything while he was a prisoner of war.

A: Yes, he...they would send like a little form thing letter and my mother was able to send some things to him. And one thing that my mother was able to send to him that made my grandfather just really quite disappointed. My brother Francis asked for, he didn't smoke, but he asked for cigarettes because they could barter the cigarettes with the guards. And anyway we got a few letters through the Red Cross. There's a...anyways this is the one that little gal wrote up...there's an article in there a three page article of Francis and his prisoner of war.

A: [Shirley] That was in the Spectrum three different days when he finally decided to talk about it.

A: They took a picture of him and his crew and that and I didn't even know this had been put out until that and there's one the obituary of my brother Howard that just passed away. And there's this same plaque that that I've got.

Q: She took a picture of it, a nice picture didn't she?

A: [Shirley] Yeah she did.

A: But any way.

Q: That's her paper she did?

A: Yeah.

Q: That's nice.

A: She did that as a class project. You know Janet Seegmiller?

Q: Yeah.

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A: She's the one who steered her to me on this.

Q: And Janet's the one who called us and said we need to get a permanent collection of these going so we can keep them. Some where in the county and so she has asked us the Cedar Library to do that.

A: I've been interviewed by her through the Utah parks about Shirley and I and we met out to Bryce.

A: [Shirley] Well because we worked out to Bryce for six years or more, six or seven years.

A: Janet has done a lot to put down the history.

Q: She's done a lot for the community.

A: That's right.

A: [Shirley] She really has.

Q: Anything else you want to say?

A: Gosh I don't. I remember my brother Howard when he came home, he said "I wouldn't give...I wouldn't give anything"...how did he say it..."for the experiences I'd had but I wouldn't want to go through it again."

Q: Yeah...it must make you appreciate all the men and women that are going over to Iraq to actually see the combat that...

A: [Shirley] Exactly, I have a nephew over there with the guard right now too. You can appreciate their patriotism and their willingness...this morning at graduation, we had a grandson graduate and a young man sang the national anthem and what an outstanding job he did. And he just got back from Iraq. And it was sung with feeling that song and I think that the majority of them have really a great feeling of patriotism.

Q: They've certainly sacrificed.

A: [Shirley] They have, yes they have.

Q: Just like you I mean I really don't think there is a better way to bring that than what your wife just said, music.

A: Yeah.

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Q: I mean what you participated in was...probably brought so much comfort to so many people...families and kids and soldiers, just so many people. It is just an invaluable thing. I believe it is. You done or?

A: I think so.

Q: Well thanks for your time.

A: Well I thank you for taking time and I appreciate somebody to do these things. It takes good people behind the scenes to make sure these kinds of things happen.