A Veterans Oral History
Arthur John Braaten
[2007]

Heritage Education Commission
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In 2000, Bev Paulson, Heritage Education Commission member, developed a plan to record Veterans' oral histories, starting with WW II Veterans. Bev made a significant personal donation to start our Veterans' oral history project which was supplemented by other concerned individuals, we have recorded 65 oral histories of WWII veterans plus a few Korean War and Vietnam War Veteran. The project is ongoing.

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Interviewee: John Braaten (JB)
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Arthur John Braaten Biography

Arthur Braaten was born in Rosholt, SD and graduated from Rosholt High School in 1942. Arthur was inducted into the Army in 1944 and was trained in Infantry Combat, Military Police and Radio Code School. His military duties included being assigned to the 793rd Military Police Battalion and also served guard duty at the Nurnberg War Criminals Trials.

Decorations:
- Army of Occupation
- European – African – Middle Eastern Campaign Medal
- World War II Victory Medal

Transcription

LJ: Would you state your name?

JB: John Braaten.

LJ: John, where were you born?

JB: I was born at Rosholt, South Dakota.

LJ: And how big a town is Rosholt?

JB: It's about 400.

LJ: And who were your parents?

JB: Oscar and Agnes Braaten.

LJ: What did they do?

JB: They farmed.

LJ: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

JB: I had two brothers and two sisters.

LJ: What did you do, did you go to high school in Rosholt?

JB: Yes, I did.

LJ: And what year did you graduate?

JB: I graduated in 1942.

LJ: Okay. And what did you do after graduation?

JB: I mostly farmed.

LJ: Farmed along with your father?

JB: Yes.

LJ: And, when did you go into the service?

JB: I went into the service in November of 1944.

LJ: Were you drafted or did you volunteer?

JB: I guess I kind of volunteered.

LJ: And where did you go for your training?

JB: I went to Camp Wolters, Texas.

LJ: How long was training?

JB: That was 16 weeks.

LJ: And, what did you during that time?

JB: Mostly infantry training.

LJ: What branch of the service did you go into?

JB: I was in the Army.

LJ: In the Army. - Any special memories come back from that time during boot camp?

JB: No, it was kind of tough then. They squeezed a lot of things in a short period of time.

LJ: How long were you there?

JB: I think I was in Camp Wolters 16 weeks.

LJ: And where did you go from there?

JB: I went to – I think I was shipped overseas -- to England.

LJ: How long were you on the ship?

JB: Sixteen days.

LJ: And what was that like?

JB: Well I was on KP for 16 days. There was a lot of sickness.

LJ: How about you? Were you seasick?

JB: No. I was pretty good.

LJ: So, 16 days you got to England. Where in England?

JB: Oh, I know too. -- Southampton.

LJ: And what happened once you got to Southampton?

JB: Well, then we were transported immediately over to Le Havre, France. And, we were loaded up on these railroad cars and shipped to – I ended up at Nuremberg, Germany. That's where the first division was.

LJ: Okay. And what did you do there?

JB: I was assigned to the first division at Nuremberg. And then we kept advancing into Czechoslovakia and when the war ended, we were about thirty miles inside of Czechoslovakia. We wanted to meet the Russian soldiers there.

LJ: What was it like?

JB: Well, it was a lot of confusion. There were so many Germans surrendering. A lot of civilians. We had up to a 100,000 every day. The biggest problem was to feed them, because they hadn't eaten for many days. You know, they were starving.

LJ: -- Can you tell us about some of the people that you worked with during that time?

JB: The German prisoners? Well, yeah, they were trying desperately to get away from the Russians, so they were, they had been fighting for days and days and not much to eat and they didn't have anything. And of course there wasn't much food left in the country either for the Germans. And there was a lot of civilians that came, too. They were pushing baby buggies with supplies and little children in them and they were really in a desperate situation. They were desperate and angry, because they lost the war.

LJ: The Germans?

JB: Yeah. They were very bitter about that. They had been promised victory for so many years.

LJ: And what year was this now?

JB: That was in 1945.

LJ: 1945. And what was your mission at that point?

JB: Well, our mission was to keep after the Germans until they surrendered and they did. And I guess our mission was to meet the Russians and to turn it over to them, because Czechoslovakia was turned over to the Russians. So then when the Russians did show up, we returned to Nuremberg and that's where I was stationed the rest of the time.

LJ: And that was in Germany?

JB: Yes.

LJ: Nuremberg, Germany. How long were you there?

JB: Well, I think I was there over a year, about 15 months, I think. I – when I got back to Nuremberg, then we were transferred to the 793rd MP Battalion and we started training for guard duty at the Nuremberg Prison.

LJ: What was that like?

JB: The Nuremberg Prison was a three-story structure and it had cells all the way around the outside perimeter. And then, there was a long corridor in the middle where the doors open to the cells. And that's where we stood guard.

LJ: How many prisoners?

JB: There were – they started out with 26, but 21 of them stood trial. And of course the most notorious was Hermann Goering and Rudolf Hess besides a bunch of generals and lesser ones, you know.

LJ: What were they like?

JB: Well they were . . .

LJ: As prisoners?

JB: As prisoners they were kind of defiant to begin with because they were used to giving orders and not taking orders, so they were kind of hard to handle.

LJ: They were each in their own cell?

JB: Yes.

LJ: What were the prison conditions like?

JB: Well, the prison conditions weren't so bad. It was a pretty - nice enough prison, but it was so old. And the cells were only about 12 feet square. And they had – the sewer system must have been bad, because it had such a stench in there. It was hard to keep from getting sick.

LJ: How long did you serve as a guard in the prison?

JB: I started there when, -- oh, I think it was the end of May in '45, and until August 30 – or about September of 1946.

LJ: Over a year.

JB: Yeah. That – first we guarded them in the prison cells until the trial started and then I was transferred to the courtroom and stood guard in there.

LJ: What was that like to, to see the court trial?

JB: That was really something to see. I mean it was four powers that were conducting the trial. It was England, France, and United States and Russia. They had there – because of there's so many nationalities; they had five different microphones that you could turn to five different languages. Whatever one you understood. And if there was someone on the witness stand, they had another language for. If somebody was from Norway was on, they'd have a Norwegian language, too.

LJ: That's interesting. How long did the trial go on?

JB: The trial I – it started – yeah the trials opened on November 20, 1945 and closed August 31, 1946. The sentencing took place October 1, 1946.

LJ: And what sentences did they get?

JB: There were eleven of them that were condemned to die by hanging. And Hermann Goering escaped that because he committed suicide the night before. He had a cyanide pill embedded in his navel under the skin. And he just squeezed it and took it in his mouth and he was dead instantly.

LJ: Oh, wow.

JB: He always bragged that he didn't have to stand trial, if he didn't want to. I guess he thought he was just being a good sport. But nobody took him seriously, but he had that pill and he could have ended it at anytime, you know.

LJ: And what about Hess?

JB: Hess, he was sentenced to life in prison.

LJ: What was his reaction, when he got the sentence?

JB: Well, I don't recall his reaction, but everybody expected him to be hanged, too. But he got life in prison.

LJ: Why was he spared?

JB: Well, he's the one that went to England and I guess they tried to make – they figured he tried to make peace with England. And therefore, he probably didn't – wasn't involved in the war as long as Hermann Goering and Rudolf Hess, so he got by with life in prison.

LJ: Now who's this that you're referring to?

JB: Rudolf Hess.

LJ: Okay. -- How many people observed the trial? Do you recall?

JB: I don't recall but there was a small place for spectators and they had to have permissions to get in there and tickets, but there weren't very many. Mostly from different countries is what they could get in there.

LJ: What happened after the trial was over?

JB: Well, then . . .

LJ: What were your orders then?

JB: Then, as soon as the trial ended, we were dismissed and they had new guards take over, because it was time for me to go home. So then in September, I guess we were dismissed after August 31. And then, I think I went home in October or November.

LJ: So how long a time were you overseas in total time?

JB: Well…

LJ: About two years?

JB: April -- no about a year and a half. I was over there about a year and a half.

LJ: Did you see any of the concentration camps?

JB: I didn't see – I didn't go right to them, but I was real close to them but I never got to go there. But they were something to see, too. But in the courtroom, they had all the evidence from the concentration camps piled up against these people. They had truckloads of evidence from all the wars and -- they -- after the trial was recessed for the day, we could go in and look at the exhibits. And I recall there was one -- the Germans had done scientific work on the prisoners in the concentration camps, -- and there was a head of a Polish man that had been shrunk to three-fifths of its natural size. And then they had made lampshades out of human skin and real nice intricate designs in them.

LJ: And they had all that for evidence.

JB: Yes. You wouldn't believe the things that they'd done. They had so many movies and pictures of the concentration camps through the years of what they had done to torture people. Like the Jews, they really tortured them. Of course, the Jews had a

lot of gold in their teeth and they just took a plier and pulled their teeth out without anything. And of course, they didn't feed them. They just --

LJ: They were skeletal.

JB: Just skeletons. I saw one of three prisoners that had been found alive. And he happened to be a Finlander, but he could talk Norwegian. So I got to talk to him after the trials, you know. But not in the courtroom, but in the – and he said that – he told me about all the treatment they had. It was terrible.

LJ: He was a prisoner of the . . .

JB: Yes.

LJ: The concentration camps.

JB: He was – just him and two more were alive. But I think he was the only that survived. When the Americans found them in the concentration camp, he was just laying there with his eyes open amongst all these corpses. And they didn't dare to feed him, because feeding him would have killed him. So they just dripped sugar water into him for several days until he got enough strength so they could pick him up and put him on a stretcher and move him. And then they put him in a hospital and treated him a little more until he got strong enough, then they flew him to Switzerland. And he recovered pretty good. But he was shaky, terrible shaky. He couldn't, he couldn't hold a coffee cup. So he was in bad shape.

LJ: So he was their best witness?

JB: Yes, he was. And he – I noticed that he didn't have any fingernails. They were all pulled out. They were all gone.

LJ: That must have been so hard to see all that?

JB: You can't believe the suffering that those people went through. He told about whenever they slept on cots and whenever anyone would die - they'd bring them a small ration of, oh, potato peelings or something like, that's all they got. He said if someone died during the night, they'd hide him; put him under a cot or hide him so that they would get his rations, the one that died. They'd get a little bit. So many rations were brought in and they'd get his, so that's how they could survive. It was unbelievable.

LJ: Devastating.

JB: Yeah, it sure was.

LJ: So after you were relieved of your duties as a guard, you went back to, was it England?

JB: No. I just – we went back to France and boarded a ship there for home. And we were 16 days on the way home again.

LJ: And how was that, that trip home?

JB: That was pretty good. That was better than the one going over, because the war was still going and we were 49 ships in the convoy. And we had some oil tankers along so we had to go slow so they could keep up.

LJ: What was it like getting back home?

JB: Well, it was good. It was good to get home.

LJ: Do you remember the day?

JB: No, not really. I don't really remember that. It was certainly different than what we were used to.

LJ: Was your family, all there to meet you?

JB: Yeah, I believe they were. I think so.

LJ: How did you feel about leaving after what you saw?

JB: Leaving Germany?

LJ: Yeah, over in Germany?

JB: I was glad to get out of there, because they wanted us to enlist for twenty years, and I didn't go for that. I never did like it, Army life. It was just not what I was cut out for. So I was glad to get out of there.

LJ: Was it a four-year commitment though, when you did enlist?

JB: No. It was just kind of – I kind of drafted or enlisted, you might say, and then it was just for the duration of the war, so whenever the war was over and I done my duty at Nuremberg, they turned me loose.

LJ: Um hum. And what did you do after you left the military?

JB: Well then I farmed for one year. And then I went to Alexandria, Minnesota, and I went to a class on the G. I. Bill of Rights, took up bricklaying at the University of Minnesota.

LJ: Good for you.

JB: So that's how I ended up as a bricklayer.

LJ: Made use of the G. I. Bill?

JB: G. I. Bill of Rights, that's right.

LJ: Good for you. And, how long did you do brickwork?

JB: I done that for 25 years.

LJ: And what about the farm? Were you doing that at the same time?

JB: We were doing – when we moved up here, then we were kind of farming and bricklaying at the same time. That was hard, many hours.

LJ: I'm sure. And you say, how many acres did you farm?

JB: We farmed close to 1,000 acres now.

LJ: Do you have any final thoughts about what you went through during that time in Germany? Any special buddy stories or any special characters stick out that you'd like to talk about?

JB: Well you always have characters in the Army, but you don't remember too much about them. I still have two good buddies that I am in contact with. One is from Texas and one is from southern Minnesota.

LJ: Did you go to any reunions?

JB: No, but we have gotten together between us, and they were here last summer to visit us. So --

LJ: Did you ever go back to Europe after the war was over?

JB: I went back to Norway to visit my relatives, but I'd like to go back to Germany and see Nuremberg again because now it's all built up.

LJ: Would be very interesting.

JB: Yeah. That prison that was where – housed these prisoners – was an old German prison that they used to use for German prisoners before the war. And then during the war they had American prisoners of war in there. And of course the British and American bombers knew about this so they avoided that building, but the rest of Nuremberg was three-fourths destroyed, 75%. Nothing left of it much.

LJ: Sad. -- Mr. Braaten, what do you think about the war that we are fighting now in Afghanistan? Do you think we should be there?

JB: Yeah, I think it's necessary; because if we aren't there, we'll never get rid of terrorism. That was one of the hotbeds of it, so if we can get rid of that one, maybe we'll diminish the threat some.

LJ: Do you think it's a war we can win?

JB: I think we can but it is going to take time, you know, to get them all. They're hiding all over.

LJ: That's a scary thing.

JB: Yeah, that's the trouble.

LJ: We've got sleeper cells in our own country.

JB: Yeah.

LJ: How did the war affect your life?

JB: Well -- it wasn't -- it didn't affect my life very much because I wasn't in the thick of the fighting like some of them were. And I -- I guess I'll be remembered as being in the Nuremberg trials – getting to know all the big shots of Germany.

LJ: Yeah. -- Mr. Braaten, how would you like to be remembered?

JB: Well, I really don't know.

LJ: Someone who served his country?

JB: Served the country and was in the Nuremberg trials, I guess. That's kind of special. I got to know all those people.

LJ: -- Anything else you'd like to say for the record before we close?

JB: -- Well, -- I really don't know. I've had a good life, that's for sure. I've never been sick very much so --

LJ: That's great.

JB: So I have had a -- lived a good life so far.

LJ: That's great. Well thank you very much, Mr. Braaten.

JB: Thank you.