A Veterans Oral History

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Myron Bright
Narrator

Stephanie Manesis
Interviewer

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Fargo, ND

SM: It is August 31, 2011. This is Stephanie Manesis; and I am interviewing Judge Myron Bright, who is a federal judge in the Eighth District.

MB: Eighth Circuit.

SM: He lives in Fargo, North Dakota, and we are interviewing in Fargo, North Dakota.

MB: I was born and raised on the Iron Range country of northern Minnesota. The place where I lived was Eveleth, Minnesota, but prior to that my family lived in a neighboring town of Gilbert, Minnesota.

When I speak of the Iron Range I was born, of course, in 1919 and the Iron Range is where the iron mines are located. Then we had a great amount of high grade ore and most of the people who worked in the mines were immigrants from Italy and Central Europe and some even from Wales, England, called them "Cousin Jacks."

And almost all my friends were first generation Americans, as I was. My parents had immigrated before they were married separately to Duluth, Minnesota, and we had five children in the family. My father was a merchant. We had a store in Gilbert, and I went to school there until I was eight years old; and then we moved to Eveleth, Minnesota. And, as I say, that was a great place to live. It was a melting pot of various nationalities and races. We had, fortunately, a very good school system, and I went through high school there and into two years of junior college. Then I went into the University of Minnesota and to law school. I was there on a four-year plan. I served three years. I was at the law school three years; and in 1942, I was drafted into the military.

SM: When were you drafted, what month?

MB: I was drafted in July of 1942.

SM: Can you tell me about the day that you heard about Pearl Harbor?

MB: I remember it like yesterday. At that time, I was living in a rooming house along with another young man who was beginning law school. He, incidentally, was a North Dakota boy; name was Lionel Greenberg. I don't know if he's still alive but he did live in St. Paul. And I remember I came home. I came to my residence about noon and I got a call from my sister-in-law. Her name was Rochelle Bright; she was married to my oldest brother, Joseph Bright. And she said, "Don't expect to see Roy," my brother Roy, who was then in the military in the Air Corps. Back then it was the Air Corps and she said, "Pearl Harbor has just been bombed." And then, of course, we turned on the radio and learned the news about the Japanese bombing Pearl Harbor.

SM: What descent were your parents, Judge Bright?

MB: My father, both my parents were Jewish. They had grown up, my father in the Black Sea area and they never talked much about their life in the old country. He immigrated to this country when he was about, I think, 23 years of age, something like that. My mother used to say, "Vilna geboren," which meant that she was born near what is now Vilna, Poland, but I think was part of Russia. And her mother and father also immigrated to Duluth and I think, from what I know, they lived sort of as a farm family, raising chickens and farming a little bit. But neither of my parents spoke very much about the old country, because I think life was so hard, and there was also a lot anti-Semitism in Russia, and they were exposed to it.

SM: Your father was from the Odessa area?

MB: Yes.

SM: Did they experience a lot of religious persecution, is that the main reason why they moved?

MB: I would assume so, but they never talked about it.

SM: So you were your third year in pre-law at the University of Minnesota?

MB: No, I was third year in law school.

SM: You were third in law school when you got drafted?

MB: Right.

SM: Tell me about what happened when you were drafted.

MB: Well I was drafted and we were put up in tents at Fort Snelling. I got sworn in and I'm not sure how long I was at Fort Snelling but it wasn't too long. And then I was assigned to the Quartermaster Corps at … I'm trying to think of the name of the place, Fort Leonard Wood, just in Missouri. And my basic trained at Fort Leonard Wood was there for, I don't remember how many weeks. I was there in July and August and, I think about September, I was moved out and was assigned to Camp Hale in Colorado, that's the ski troop place.

I remember Camp Hale very well. It was up in the mountain area. I think we were about 10,000 feet. I remember we played touch football and I really got sick because of the high elevation. But, anyway, it's kind of interesting at Camp Hale I was assigned to the kitchen. And I was just a buck private and I was digging a ditch when the officer came over. I think he was a second lieutenant, I don't know his name, and he said, "You're Myron Bright?" And I said, "Yes." "Well," he said, "I've seen your background and I want you to be my purchasing and contracting officer." And so he got me out of digging in the ditch.

I put my dress uniform on, which was khaki uniform. And I helped him organize what we call the purchasing contracting office in Camp Hale, Colorado. That was where we were ordering supplies for the military. And he said, "I'm going to make you a staff sergeant." That was unheard of. But he did make me a buck sergeant. That's with three stripes and that was unusual to jump from a private to a buck sergeant. But he did it for me and I remember we had a number of regular Army people on that base in our outfit who really didn't think much of a draftee becoming a sergeant so quick.

I served in that capacity, I think, about until January of 1943. And then the Army started to replace their military people with women and civilians, mostly women. They brought in a woman to be the purchasing contracting officer, and I taught her what I knew. And in the meantime, I applied to go to Officer Training School. As a draftee I had a rating for limited service, whatever that was, so they were not to put me into combat service right away. Once I volunteered to go to the Officer Candidate School that ended that. And let's see, I went to Officer Candidate School in Camp Lee, Virginia, and that was Officer Candidate School was 90 days. And I think I

was at Officer Candidate School from about January 16th or thereabouts, February, March, and I think I graduated in April and got my second lieutenant bars and was assigned to a Quartermaster Truck Company in Pendleton, Oregon.

SM: This was 1943?

MB: Forty-three and – I'm trying to think of my career after that.

I did go back for advanced training at a couple of places in the military, once at a truck school in Omaha, Nebraska. I know I went back for advanced training in the Quartermaster Corps at Camp Lee, Virginia. And meantime, I was assigned to a company that moved to near Fresno, California, where we trained and we were the 1084th Quartermaster Company. We trained there and then we moved from California to Florida; and I can't remember the place in Florida, but it was near one of the big cities. I'm trying to think of the name of the city in Florida on the Gulf Coast.

SM: Near Pensacola?

MB: No, it was on the opposite coast. I can't remember the name of the town but it might come to me, I'm not sure. So then I was with the 1084th Quartermaster Corps and I was assigned a position as a supply officer. Then we were training to go overseas. We left and then we went all the way across the country, again, to California to Port of Los Angeles and we did more training.

And then in January of forty . . . Let's see I think it was the end of January of '44 or the end of December in '43, I was assigned to set up a new base northeast of Calcutta. We went from the Bihar Province over to this new base by air, as I remember, because there were only a few of us. And we were to set up a base there called Shamshernagar. That was the name. I'll try to spell it: "s-h-a-m-i-n-a-g-a-r." It was just a railroad [unclear] and we set up a base there. At that time we were getting ready for the Air Corps, which was to fly supplies "over the hump" to China to reinforce the troops of Chiang Kai-shek.

And so I was the Quartermaster Supply Officer. It was my task of my company to set up a supply depot, not only our company, but also we were part of what we call the 61st Air Service Group which had supplied everything you can think of from clothes to munitions to ammunition, and so forth, to the Air Corps and to our own troops. So that was my job. I was there supplying the Air Corps, which was "flying the hump" until Chiang Kai-shek got beaten back by the Japanese, and China was appeared to be

lost to the Allied Forces. And then I was transferred again to a base near Calcutta. It was at that time, of course, that the atom bomb was dropped and the war ended and I got back. I spent some time in India in Calcutta. And I got back to the States at a base near Seattle, Washington, and then was transported over to Minnesota, and was discharged from active service. I stayed in the Reserves for several years. I left the Reserves because I was married after I got back and went back to law school and got my degree.

SM: When you were in law school and you got drafted, was it still three years at that time for a law degree or was it more?

MB: Well they had two programs. If you had a four-year degree you could get through law school in three years. But if you had only two years of college, as I had had at Eveleth Junior College, you had to go to school for four years. When I returned from overseas in about March or April then I was on terminal leave, and I went back to school the summer session in June of 1946.

SM: Tell me when you first went into the Army, you said you had limited service in terms of actual active duty, why was that?

MB: Because of my eyes, but after I became an officer I was no longer on limited duty.

SM: So because you decided to enlist as an officer, they took that stipulation off?

MB: Let's say I got through the medicals and showed that I could see well enough to be on active duty.

SM: Would they have put you in combat had the circumstance come up for it?

MB: Yes, I was, as a matter of fact. I was supposed to go to in combat with a combat unit to the European Theater. I was what you might call an "extra." I had all the shots and everything, but they didn't need me, so I stayed. I think that was when I was at Camp … I believe that was when I was at Camp Hale or maybe Fort, yes, Camp Hale. It had to be. No. Yes. It was at Camp Hale.

SM: Tell me about your day-to-day activities as a purchasing agent in Colorado.

MB: I had a warehouse made of tents and I was in what we called a basha (sp?), that's a bamboo office building. We would process orders from various companies that needed supplies. And every once in a while, I'd have to get an airplane and fly into Calcutta and go to the warehouses and fill the

airplane up with whatever supplies we could get and bring them back to the base. But otherwise the supplies came, I think, by air or by rail. I can't remember. But anyway I had a staff and we would process the orders. We had a lot of backorders because you couldn't fill some. And we would arrange to get supplies to wherever outfits wanted them or needed them.

SM: So where you doing this in Colorado, it was only for the Army?

MB: When I was in Colorado, I was at Camp Hale. That's where the school was where the ski troopers trained. And they were just starting to come in when I was there, and we were supplying the ski troopers with whatever supplies they needed.

SM: Did you do purchasing also when you were in India? That's where I wasn't quite clear.

MB: Well I didn't purchase exactly but I ordered the supplies from the various quartermaster warehouses. The other thing I did in India, for which was very interesting. We had an area in India where they would send the airplanes which were wrecked. It was just full of airplanes and the Army had to get rid of them. And so I was assigned the task of finding them a buyer. I traveled to what is now known as Tata Steel Mills. Now I can't remember the name of the city but it was quite a way from our base. And I made arrangements to ship several carloads of aluminum from the airplanes to that outlet. And I got a letter of commendation, somewhere in there, from my commanding officer.

SM: So until you were setting up a new base in India, were you doing primarily purchasing activities?

MB: **When I say purchasing, I didn't buy anything exactly. Although the only thing that I really dealt with civilians on was the scrap airplanes near the end of the war but other than that my supply officer was to find out what the troops needed and make sure and get it the necessary supplies. The quartermaster had warehouses in Calcutta. That was my source of supply and I assumed they had a source of supply from the United States.**

SM: Tell me about India during that time, what was it like?

MB: **Most of the time that I spent was in Calcutta. And Calcutta smelled to high heaven. It was a putrid city. You could smell Calcutta 50 miles into the ocean. And when you got up in the morning, you'd find maybe a dozen people dead in the doorways of various places. As you know, that was before India had got its freedom from the British. So the British people ran the**

country. Their civil service was mostly Anglo-Indians who were – and, of course, the Hindu people who followed caste regimes, "c-a-s-t-e" were very poor.

The other thing that I noticed is out in the rural areas and we were in a rural area; people were doing their farming like I heard about 300 years ago with oxen, plow the fields or hand-held plows. They didn't have any mechanized equipment. They used animals to draw water from a well. It was a very poor country in terms of poverty.

SM: How much interaction did you have with the Indians?

MB: **The Indian people?**

SM: Yes.

MB: **Not too much. I had what we called a "bearer servant" that did my laundry and made my bunk up and things of that sort. Also stole from me whatever. And I had an association, in the area in which I was located, with the Scotch people. They were running the tea plantations in the area. The Indian people that I generally met, I at least could talk to, were mostly in the servant class. Or worked at some of the clubs, but you didn't have much association with the native Indian people at all.**

SM: Tell me about what happened when you found out your servant had stolen from you?

MB: **Well I missed some handkerchiefs and some other things. I didn't do anything.**

SM: What was your perception of how the British treated the natives?

MB: **As inferiors.**

SM: What was your perspective about the British being there in the first place, ruling the country?

MB: **We could not have set up this air base without the help of the British troops. They were there, too. And I had a high regard for the military people from Great Britain or England or Australia, wherever they came from. We were away from the city most of the time; so I really wasn't too cognizant of the impression by English people of the native Indians. But I knew it was there.**

As a matter of fact, one of the bases I was at had been a former prison. I was told that Mahatma Gandhi had been held prisoner at that place.

SM: What was the prison like?

MB: **It was stone walls and bars.**

SM: And dirt floors?

MB: **I don't remember. I think it was a cement floor, but I can't recall.**

SM: What was your most memorable event that happened when you were India?

MB: **I had lots of them but I'll tell you my memorable event. When I first got to our base in India, and after we had set up, our commanding officer was a Hispanic, called Colonel Cordero. He was a full colonel and I understood he had been a classmate at West Point of General Eisenhower. And because of my legal training, I was assigned both to defend soldiers who were charged in special court-martials with some infraction of military law or, for the time being, I would prosecute. And I remember one incident that was something.**

I was having breakfast, I think, with an officer by the name of Lieutenant Kunkel "k-u-n-k-e-l." He was the defense counsel on some cases that were scheduled for special court-martial. And the court-martial judge, there was only one judge on these special court-martials, was the executive officer of the company. He was the lieutenant colonel. Unfortunately what he had said to me when he found out I was the prosecutor, something to the effect, "Well, we'll give him a trial and then we'll find him guilty and punish him." That was not the way courts were supposed to operate. And I mentioned that and I told the defense counsel I was really concerned about the impartiality of what we call the [unclear] judge advocate. The defense counsel went to Colonel Cordero and repeated my conversation. And Cordero was a very military person.

He called me into his tent headquarters, stood me at attention and looked me in the eye and said, "All right, Lieutenant Bright, tell me what Lieutenant Colonel so-and-so said." I was shaking in my shoes. And I told him the truth. I was too afraid to lie, put it that way. But I told him the truth. The Colonel Cordero said, "Dismissed." The next day the lieutenant colonel, who had been the executive officer, was on his way out. Where he went I don't know, but Colonel Cordero got rid of him right away which, to me, was a very significant event.

But living as we were in India and being away as long as we were, it was very difficult for some of the enlisted men, although they were doing their job. We didn't have any great fear of being bombed or being in active combat although part of my outfit did travel into an area of Burma where there had been a great battle and were stationed there for a while. Anyway, one of my members of the company, it was very disarming to me, committed suicide by throwing himself under the wheel of a truck.

But I was will say this I've had two experiences in my life that have helped me be what I am today. As you know, I'm a Federal Judge. I've been a Federal Judge for 43 years. And the two big experiences that I think have affected my outlook on life and people were: one, growing up in a melting pot such as I did in Eveleth and Gilbert, Minnesota, on the Iron Range; and, the other was the interaction I had with officers and men in the military. That made a big impression on me and I always felt that we all have equal rights and there's good in everybody; some better than others.

SM: Tell me a little bit more about how your interactions with the other officers in the military affected your outlook on life.

MB: **Well that's kind of hard to say because I think of the basic outlook – the basic experience was that I served with officers, although it was an all white company. I have to tell you that although I did serve when I went to Camp Hale the second time, there were African-American or black officers that I served with at Camp Hale on my second – not Camp Hale, Fort Lee – Camp Lee, Virginia, on my second tour of this quartermaster school. I think the main thing is that I interacted and met with other officers from all over the country, different backgrounds. We learned to cooperate and we learned to rely on each other and we learned to work together.**

My closest friend in the military, of course, were an officer who was also in my outfit. I had a captain who was from Boston, Boston Irish; name was Gallagher, wonderful human being, decent man. For some reason, he always reminded me of – what's that television show about the military?

SM: "MASH"?

MB: "**MASH", yes. The old captain in "MASH," Captain Gallagher reminded me of that, very easy going but a good officer. And my fellow officers in my company were very friendly with me and one of them was from Superior, Wisconsin. His name was Lieutenant Murray. But my best friend was a Lieutenant Miller from Seattle. I got to know people from all over the country, and of course, the enlisted people. As a matter of fact there are, from my old outfit besides myself, the 1084th QM Company, I was with truck**

companies. I commanded a truck company there for a while, too, in India and we transported materials over the mountains, but I had just a good relationship and I learned a lot about people.

SM: Were you serving with any other Jewish officers or any enlisted men that were Jewish?

MB: **Not that I know of. Let me think. I did have an officer in the quartermaster that was a traveling officer. He was a friend of mine from Chisholm, Minnesota. Trying to remember his name … that came on the base. He was Jewish. I knew him from my days when I went to Eveleth High School. We played football against each other. But other than that, I don't know of a single, either Jewish. Yes, I do, come to think of it. One of our pilots was Jewish, but he was in the air service group but he was not in my company. That's the only one I knew of.**

SM: Tell me about the man who committed suicide. Do you know what the circumstances were around that?

MB: **My reaction is that he was Hispanic but I can't remember much about it except it was a very devastating event for all of us. And I remember I called the company together, my part of the company. You know, our company was divided into parts and the people who worked for me – I'll show you a picture in a minute – I said, "Look, this is a war and we've got to do our duty whatever that is." I said, "You're so lucky you're not out and shooting your rifles at somebody. Just stay calm and cool, do your job, and in all likelihood you'll get back home alive."**

Here's an interesting picture. This is not the right one, this was with a monkey. One of my officers had a monkey as his pet, so he was a flight officer so that was kind of interesting.

I was a company commander of two companies. Near the end of the war after Gallagher left, I became the commanding officer of my company. And then later, I became commanding officer of a truck company. But the war was winding down and about over at that time.

I don't claim to be a shooting hero, although I was in the war zone. And because I was in the war zone, I did get two battle stars. But I'm not going to tell you that I've got the shooting experience and the danger experience of a lot of gunners. I was lucky. But I did what I was supposed to do, many of us did that. My wife was in the service. You can take those things with you.

SM: Thank you. Can you tell me just a little bit about your wife?

MB: My wife came from Clinton, Iowa. She had some nurses' training and she decided to join the WAVES. I met her when I was on terminal leave in about May of 1946. She was was stationed in Chicago. It was a Navy Unit and her mother and my sister were best friends. She came from Clinton, Iowa. My sister came from Sterling, Illinois, very close; and she said, "I want you to call this young lady." And I called her, Frances Reisler, and I picked her up at her station. And we went out three nights in a row and really hit it off and one thing led to another.

I went back to school in the summer of 1946 and the winter of '47 until the spring quarter when I graduated. She came to school in the fall to the University of Minnesota, and so we got together. We got engaged on Thanksgiving in 1946. We got married on December 26, 1946. She was a very bright lady, although she never graduated from college; and she was really a great partner. We were very active in politics in North Dakota in the late '50s and early '60s.

SM: She was a pharmacist's mate in the Great Lakes, is that correct?

MB: Yes.

SM: During the war?

MB: She'd had some nurses' training. She never went overseas but she enjoyed the military.

SM: I'd like to ask some questions about your Jewish background. Do you have a few more minutes?

MB: Okay.

SM: Growing up were you the only Jew in Eveleth?

MB: Oh no. There were 20 families. It was a pretty-good sized community. You know how many there are now in Eveleth?

SM: No.

MB: One.

SM: Did you have a shul? Did you have a synagogue?

MB: We had a synagogue. We had what we called a "rav," which was not a rabbi but a learned person. I had a bar mitzvah and I did learn some fundamentalist. I did take lessons in speaking Hebrew but they never lasted with me. My folks were Orthodox. When I got married, Fritzie came from a more liberal family. And her folks had been liberals. I forget what you call them, but anyway, like the temple here in Fargo. You asked me about Eveleth. No, we had a pretty good Jewish community, but we were very much integrated in the community as a whole.

You understand that people who immigrated from the old country, for the most part, were not allowed to own any land. They lived in a ghetto. And many of them – my mother actually came over, she was a seamstress. My father came over, he worked in the shipyards at Duluth-Superior. Then he went out and was a peddler. And finally, when the mines opened up at the turn of the century, he and my mother moved and I got a picture.

He had this store in McKinley. And then he moved to Gilbert, which is the next town bigger. And I think he started the store – probably they got married in 1903 or 1905. He had the store in McKinley until probably, oh, 1916 or '17, then moved to Gilbert. That's where I was a little boy. I was born in Eveleth but we lived in Gilbert until I was eight years old. Then in 1927 we moved to Eveleth, and he and his brother-in-law were partners in this larger merchandise store.

SM: When the bomb was dropped on Pearl Harbor, did you know anything about what was happening to Jews in Germany?

MB: Oh, yes. We knew that, yes, we didn't know the extent of the persecution and the killing of six million Jews, but we knew that there was plenty of persecution, and that Hitler was a demon. One of the things that happened and I still remember it. There was a boatload of Jewish people who had escaped from Germany. And they wanted to land in the United States. And this was before we were in the war and Roosevelt wouldn't let them, and they had to go back to Germany and I assume they were all killed.

SM: Did you know anything about the killing of the Jews or did you simply think they were going to work camps?

MB: I'm trying to think. I knew that they were being persecuted. I don't think I knew about the gas chambers or not. I can't remember. I know that they were being persecuted by Hitler and he made these anti-Semitic speeches and I knew that there was terrible prejudice there. Did I know about the killing? I can't remember. I can't answer that.

SM: Do you remember after the war was done when you found out the full . . .

MB: Oh, yes, because I saw some of the movies, you bet.

SM: One more question?

MB: Of course.

SM: What do you think that we have learned and not learned from World War II, specific to the Jewish experience?

MB: What have we learned and not learned from . . .

SM: World War II.

MB: Well, of course, that was a different war than we're involved in now with the terrorist's attacks. What we have learned is that ordinary, what you might call "decent people," through propaganda and lies can be led to do really horrible things. And the German people allowed the massacre of six million Jews and others, men, women and children, regardless, and those were murders.

Unfortunately we haven't learned yet that society must – you must have tolerance to have a good society. And you must be intelligent enough to know right from wrong. A lot of people in this country were misled. I mean, we see it with these paramilitary groups. We've seen it with KKK and the Knights of Columbus who, you know, persecuted the African-Americans in our society. And we still see groups like that. It's easier to hate than to love and we must always be on our guard against somebody misleading a society where murder is a way of life. It's not alien to this world. Look what's happening in some of the African countries. It's and what's happening, for example, just recently in England where they've had all the looting and burning.

So if a society is to be peaceful and people are to live together there has to be understanding and tolerance and sometimes there's not enough of it. People want to say that we want to forget about the Holocaust. We should never forget about it because this was a terrible event. And that it happened in this really civilized country of Germany, and that it happened should give us all pause and make sure that we don't allow it happen in this country, or anything like it.

SM: What do you think of our decision to bomb Japan?

MB: That's a very good question. Certainly at the time, I was very happy that they dropped the atom bomb, because it ended the war. The reason I was happy, I was scheduled at the time that this bomb dropped to go with a group into China and to wage war against the Japanese. Who knows, if they hadn't dropped the bomb, the war had continued, who knows whether I'd still be around. And that would have been really active combat duty.

But as I've gotten older, I've got a different perspective. And right now, I cannot say. I understand why he did it, but to bomb and kill innocent people, I do not believe it can be justified, even though we were at war. I don't know. I'm ambivalent about it, like I said. Initially, as a soldier I was happy to have the war over. You know, I hated the Japanese at that time. I don't hate the Japanese now.

It's easy to be a second, an "after-the-fact quarterback," so to speak. But at least I would say now, I understand why Truman allowed it. He was one of my heroes, but I don't think we could justify it anymore. And I don't think it was a proud day in American history.

Now whether we could have ended the war in another way, I don't know. At that time, we were preparing to invade Japan and some said we would have lost a million of our soldiers in such an invasion. So there is much to be said on both sides. But from the standpoint of killing innocent people, my view right today is I'd have to say, no, it's not justified.

SM: Why did you hate the Japanese?

MB: I hated the Japanese because they attacked us and I was well aware of the atrocities that had been committed by Japanese against our troops. It was well documented and I knew about it. But, you know, that's war. We did plenty, we were not completely innocent of atrocities either. Those things happen in wartime.

Now I don't hate the Japanese now. Don't misunderstand me. I've had a lot of experience with Japanese people. I've been to Hawaii many times. There's a big Japanese community. I have friends, Japanese friends and, certainly, I have different view of Japan and I think it's really a great country.

SM: Thank you very much.