

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 17, 2009

THE DAILY RECORD

Maryland Lawyer

News and analysis of legal matters in Maryland

ASSOCIATIONS

Recording witnesses to WWII

Court reporter volunteers to capture veterans' stories for history

BY STEVE LASH

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Court reporter Al Betz — who has transcribed hundreds of thousands of pages from trials during the past 32 years — never got to record the words he longed to hear: the World War II reflections of his father, an Army veteran who died in 1988 at age 67.

“He was very reluctant to talk about his service,” Betz said. “His stories went with him.”

But now Betz has the chance to do for other sons and daughters what he was unable to accomplish for himself. As part of an ongoing project of the **Maryland Historical Society**, Betz is recording, *gratis*, the World War II memories of Marylanders who served in the bitter conflict.

Last week, the Baltimore-based society hosted a panel discussion of Maryland veterans, which Betz transcribed. Panelists included former Maryland Gov. Marvin Mandel, who served stateside at Aberdeen Proving Ground; a Tuskegee Airman; a sailor; a soldier; and a Red Cross worker.

The veterans' recollections are part of a larger exhibit by the society titled “Maryland Veterans of World War II: Our Arsenal of Democracy,” which opened Nov. 11, Veterans' Day, and runs through the end of 2009. During the exhibit's run, the society is offering all World War II vet-



RICH DENNISON

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erans free family memberships.

“This country cannot thank you enough,” said Robert W. Rogers, the society's director, in welcoming the veterans to Wednesday's panel discussion.

Mandel, 88, shared the bittersweet memory of asking his father on Dec. 7, 1941, if he knew the location of Pearl

Harbor, the naval base the Japanese had attacked that day.

“He said, ‘Damned if I know,’” Mandel recalled.

The future governor enlisted in 1942, at the age of 21. He was assigned to the weapons testing and training facility, where he was handed a battlefield rifle

from the Spanish-American War.

"We were not prepared at all for war but we were in it," Mandel said.

The United States focused its resources on fighting the war, stepping up the production of arms and munitions to fight not only in the European theater but also in the Pacific.

"I was very proud to wear a uniform and I'd be proud to wear it again," said Mandel, who served as Maryland's chief executive from 1969 to 1979. "But I hope I wouldn't have to."

'Fighting two wars'

Cyril Byron remembered receiving, with dread, his draft notice in 1942.

"When I opened the letter, it said, 'Greetings,' and I knew what it meant," he said. "I laugh now."

Byron, who served with the Tuskegee Airmen, said his all-black bomber-escort group quietly fought a separate battle during the war — racial discrimination at home. He recalled how he and his colleagues, on a trip to an Alabama movie theater, had to wait for white customers to enter before they were allowed to take their seats in the balcony.

"We were fighting two wars," Byron said.

"Can you imagine fighting for these United States and not being able to go to the movies?" he added. "We weren't bitter. We were mad."

Byron did not fly with the airmen. Rather, he served on the ground crew, keeping the escort planes in top condition. "Our motto was, 'We keep them flying,'" he recalled.

Betz, 60, said he "jumped at" the opportunity to transcribe such recollections when he learned about the society's project. He is president of **Al Betz & Associates Inc.**, which he started in 1977. His partners include Kay, his wife of 40 years, and their son, Matt.

Betz has transcribed famous events, including the 1982 trial of John W. Hinckley Jr. for his attempted assassination of President Ronald Reagan and the 1989 trial of Oliver North on allegations that he helped obstruct Congress' investigation of the Iran-Contra arms-for-hostages scandal. But he is most proud of having recorded the World War II memories.

"I love the stories and the people are so genuine," Betz said. "For the veterans, it's love of country for them and that's the spirit in which we're doing it."

Among those stories is the one told by panelist Montague "Monty" Blunden.

He was a gunnery officer on the destroyer USS Henry A. Wiley, which bombarded the Japanese island of Iwo Jima for three days prior to the Marine Corps invasion. But Blunden said his most terrifying duty was watching for Japanese kamikaze pilots, whose suicide missions entailed dive-bombing into U.S. ships.

"We were scared to death up there,"

Blunden said of standing guard.

Herbert "Herb" Davis recalled being drafted in June 1943, right out of high school, and assigned as infantry replacement and ammunition bearer.

"It was not a good place to be," he said of the dangerous duty.

Davis served in the 26th Yankee Division as part of Gen. George S. Patton's 3rd Army and landed in France about 20 days after the Normandy Invasion in June 1944, fighting against Germany in the Ardennes campaign. Davis recalled meeting up with the famous general after he and his brothers-in-arms had slogged for about two hours through knee-deep mud.

"He spent 15 minutes berating us for our appearance," Davis said of Patton. "If I could have gotten away with plugging him with my rifle..."

Passage of time

Another panelist, Katharine "Kitty" Hoffman, served with the Red Cross in New Guinea, the Dutch East Indies and the Philippines, where she and her colleagues found themselves near the shelling and often had to dive for cover. Though the world was then at war, the passage of time has left some pleasant memories, Hoffman said.

"You met all kinds of people and learned a lot about the world," she said. "I'm glad I had this experience."

Betz said that hearing the veterans' testimony has left him with a better understanding of his reticent, steelworker father, Alfred A. Betz Sr., and other men who returned from the war to Nazareth, Pa., where Betz grew up.

"My reaction to what I heard [from the panel] is that many soldiers like my dad were scarred either physically or emotionally by their WWII experience," Betz wrote in an e-mail after the event. "Maybe that's why they were so reluctant to talk about it for so long. As I look back on how my dad and other servicemen in Nazareth, Pa., conducted themselves, they were all fairly quiet guys; they unfortunately drank a little too much, but they were hard workers and good neighbors."



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Al Betz records recollections as part of a Maryland Historical Society project, 'Maryland Veterans of World War II: Our Arsenal of Democracy.'

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