Critique: Interview with Jesse Beazley

All my life I’ve had this image of World War II: two American soldiers in Russia are looking at a backpack abandoned by a retreating German soldier, and one American says to the other: “We’re going to win the war.” “Why?” “Because their soldiers don’t have winter clothes. They’re not prepared.”

So it was a surprise to learn that, in the Ardennes, the American GIs had been issued green fatigues, while the Germans had not only white uniforms, but also white-painted tanks because of the snow. Thinking of the United States’s most recent aggressive forays, it is easy to believe that just about anything U.S. soldiers attempt is going to succeed very quickly. The idea that foreign soldiers can be as skilled as Americans and even possess superior equipment, even sixty years after the War, is disconcerting. If one of the purposes of history is that we learn from it, this reminder that the United States has not always enjoyed such military superiority over its enemies makes it easy to see reasons for the historical importance of historian and oral biographer Bill Marshall’s interview with WWII veteran Jesse Beazley.

Bill Marshall conducts the interview at Jesse Beazley’s Nicholasville, Kentucky, home in quiet surroundings. He had talked to Beazley previously, presumably hearing about Beazley’s war experiences before the invasion of Normandy. The interviewer’s preparation and research are excellent; he is easily able to follow Beazley through the war, remembering names of villages and prompting Beazley for anecdotes. The questions come in chronological order, beginning just after the invasion of Normandy and concluding with the beginning of the Battle of the Bulge. Beazley often digresses, either backtracking over ground previously covered or by
stopping to reflect on war in general; Bill Marshall allows Beazley to say whatever he wants—and Beazley is never dull; he never repeats an anecdote—but then returns firmly to the chronological trail.

Jesse Beazley, interviewed in 1994, is sharp and alert, remembering French phrases, towns, and incidents. Could he be stretching the truth sometimes? I wouldn’t count that out. His anecdote about imitating the officer who ate grass when angry seems perhaps a bit too good to be true. Worrisomely, Beazley mentions early in the interview that the U.S. soldiers, just as the German soldiers did, sometimes went behind enemy lines on Hill 192, and even describes an incident when he was trapped overnight behind enemy lines and was able to see St. Lo before it was destroyed. Later in the interview, however, he asserts that while Germans sometimes came behind U.S. lines on Hill 192, “we did not do this.” Beazley also has a limited idea of the war’s big picture, not knowing even in 1994, for example, that it was Rommel rather than von Rundstedt who urged attacking the invading forces on the beaches.

The interaction between the interviewer and the subject is friendly but unobtrusive; the interviewer is clearly more interested in keeping Beazley on track as he follows him through Europe than he is in forming a personal bond, although the two certainly get along well. Indeed, Beazley would be a wonderful interview subject even for a less killed interviewer, even if he does contradict himself occasionally: his ability to reflect on war in general is moving and compelling. This is definitely an interview worth the time of transcribing completely.