

**Wisconsin Veterans Museum  
Research Center**

Transcript of an

Oral History Interview with

**DONALD BESELER**

Weapons platoon leader, Army, 424th Infantry Regiment, 106th Infantry Division

World War II

1992

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**Beseler, Donald** (b. 1923). Oral History Interview, 1992.

Master: 1 video recording (ca. 29 min.); ½ inch, color.

User: 1 audio cassette (29 min.); analog 1 7/8 ips, mono.

**Abstract:**

Donald Beseler, a Marshfield, Wisconsin native, discusses his World War II service in the US Army as a weapons platoon leader, second lieutenant, Co. A, 424th Infantry Regiment, 106th Infantry Division during the Battle of the Bulge. He describes the surprise at breakfast on the first day of the German attack, his platoon's movements, casualties, and finding themselves surrounded upon awakening on the second day. Beseler relates advances, retreats, patrols and a jeep-top Christmas Day 1944 service in front of German lines. He conveys the tension felt by him and his men on snow-laden nights on the Siegfried line when "small European deer" trip the flares that they have set. Reflecting on the disarray occasioned by the surprise attack, Beseler adds his assent to the view that American commanders had been unprepared, leaving green troops exposed and their warnings unheeded in the Ardennes. He credits the Germans with having mounted an intelligent attack, and cites a happenstance that might have changed the outcome of battle.

**Biographical Sketch:**

Beseler (b. 1923) served in the US Army during World War II with Co. A, 424th Infantry Regiment, 106th Infantry Division. He saw action at the Battle of the Bulge.

Interviewed by Carol Ann Piggins, 1992  
Draft transcript by Michelle Hagenbaugh, 2012  
Corrected by Channing Welch, 2015  
Abstract by Jeff Javid, 2015

## Interview Transcript

Beseler: It really looked nice. It looked like you were doing a good job.

Piggins: Well, I think it's going to be really a fine, fine museum. It will really stand as a fine tribute, I think.

Beseler: I think so.

Uniden-  
tified

Woman: Say your name, Donald.

Beseler: Don Beseler.

Piggins: We're set?

Woman: Go for it whenever you're ready.

Piggins: All right, good. First of all, could you just state your name, date of birth, place of residence, and the unit you served with?

Beseler: I'm Donald Beseler. I was born April 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1923, and we're living in Saint Germain, Wisconsin, and what was [laughs] the other?

Piggins: Okay—.

Beseler: [laughs] I'm sorry.

Piggins: That's fine. We'll just start—.

Beseler: [laughs] I blew it right off the bat.

Piggins: No, that's fine. We'll just start with—but what I'll ask you now is the unit you served with. Would you tell me what unit you served with?

Beseler: Served with Company A of the 424<sup>th</sup> Infantry of the 106<sup>th</sup> Division.

Piggins: And what was your service? What was your position?

Beseler: I was a weapons platoon leader within the company. I was a second lieutenant, and it was my first assignment as an officer.

Piggins: Could you tell me what location in the Ardennes [Forest] you were at on December 16<sup>th</sup> or 17<sup>th</sup>?

Beseler: On December 16<sup>th</sup> my particular company, the one I was in, was located at Lommersweiler, Belgium, which was very close to the German border and just a little bit south of Saint Vith, Belgium. That's where we were billeted in that area as a reserve unit for the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion. The other two companies of the battalion were on the front line at Winterspelt, about three or four kilometers from us.

Piggins: What did you see or hear concerning German activities?

Beseler: We didn't see any German activities up until that particular morning because as I mentioned we were in the reserve unit, back from the front line. But that morning, very early, as we were getting up, getting ready for breakfast, artillery shells started coming into the little village that we were in. None of the shells—.

Uniden-  
tified

Woman: We'll need this camera rolling again.

Piggins: Okay, we will just start with that question again. Okay, what did you hear or see concerning German activities?

Beseler: Prior to the 16<sup>th</sup> we didn't see anything of the Germans because as I mentioned we were in reserve unit to the 1st Battalion; we were three or four kilometers behind the front line. But on the morning of the 16<sup>th</sup> as we're getting ready for breakfast the artillery shells, German artillery shells, started coming in and hitting the village, and that was our first experience with the Germans.

Piggins: What were your experiences during the Battle of the Bulge on December 16<sup>th</sup> through January 1<sup>st</sup>?

Beseler: Well, we had breakfast even though the shells were coming in, and about the time breakfast was over we got orders to move up to the front. We were being committed already. In other words, the situation had deteriorated enough at that time that we were needed. So several large trucks, six by sixes, came in, and they loaded us on, and we moved up to the front. When we got probably within a kilometer of the front we disembarked and then went the rest of the way on foot into the town of Winterspelt and where we found our 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion were already engaged with the Germans, engaged in small arms fire and of course incoming artillery fire and so on. And we joined right in with those troops to help defend that particular area. We were in line about—as I mentioned I was a weapons platoon leader which meant that I had machine

guns and mortars. So my men were spread out over quite a wide area and in support of the rifle platoons, and as we were digging in, getting our machine guns and mortars in position, my platoon suffered two casualties within the first five or ten minutes. One man had a piece of shrapnel hit his helmet, cut his helmet from one end to the other, cut his scalp open. Fortunately, it didn't break a bone in his head, but he peeled down like a grape, so to speak. And another man, he was our machine gun section leader, and another man who was in the mortar group—as incoming shells he took a normal reaction that we all would I think, and he put his hands on his head on top of his helmet, and a piece of shrapnel came along and hit just right so it took off both of his thumbs, and so those were the first two casualties. They were in within, like, say, the first five or ten minutes that we were on line. It was that way all day long; it was very hectic and lots of artillery shells, lot of firing. And the area that I was in, there was a antitank gun in place from another unit, of course, and he fired two or three rounds, and then the Germans zeroed in on him, and they knocked him out, knocked his gun out, knocked the emplacement out. So that was the end of that type of defense in a hurry. I spent, oh, the better part of the day there, but later on in the day my company commander ordered me to go and find the one rifle platoon that had lost its platoon leader and try and reorganize them and get them to reorganize the defense on the other side of the village, and I went over there and found a few of the men and in a defensive position, and we stayed there that night and ended up in a small, stone shed facing down the road, of course, the direction that the Germans were coming from. Then when we woke up in the morning we found ourselves surrounded. The Germans were in town, in front of us, behind us, on both sides of us. Fortunately, we had a good supply of hand grenades. There were half a dozen of us in the shed. We just made a point of each one grabbing a bunch of hand grenades and pulling the pins and throwing them in all directions, over buildings, the buildings surrounded us and in through the windows. As they were exploding we ran and ran across the field a short distance to a barn and then from the barn into the woods where we found some other GIs, not necessarily members of our unit; they were members of all kinds of units. We spent the rest of the day there. This would be on the 17<sup>th</sup> now, December 17<sup>th</sup>, spent all day there engaging the Germans, and that night we got orders to pull out and retreat back because again we were surrounded. So we went out under cover of darkness, down through the thick evergreen forest, down the river valley, back to a little community maybe two-three more kilometers farther back called Maspelt [Belgium], and there we set up another defensive position, and by this time I was the only officer left in Company A, out of the six officers I was the only one left, and I had about twenty men. Out of 197 men, that's all that was left of us at that that we got together at that time. So we went up the hill along with, of course, members of the other companies too. It was our 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, Company A, B, and C, and D, and set up a defensive position with what we had left. But it was very difficult at that time because we didn't have anything to stop a tank with. We had our rifles, we had carbines, pistols, and when we set up the defensive

position we were attacked several times. The Germans came right up to the line with Tiger tanks, and they started to advance on us, and for some reason they stopped. Don't know why because we had nothing to stop them with, but they stopped and withdrew. And a day or so later we found ourself out again almost completely surrounded and had to withdraw again. That was probably around the twenty-first, twenty-second of December, somewhere in there. And then we went back to an area near Manhay, Belgium, and again set up another defensive position, and we relieved, I believe, members of the, I think it was the 28<sup>th</sup> Division, and there was also units of the 7<sup>th</sup> Armored Division were there, and we were trying to hold that particular road junction, really is what it amounted to. The town isn't that big, Manhay. And we were in the town, we got thrown out of the town, we were back in the town several times. And I think one interesting thing that happened to me there as again the battalion commander asked me to lead a patrol, what they call a contact patrol, across a very deep valley, heavily wooded, at night, over to another road over there where there were suppose to elements of the 7<sup>th</sup> Armored Division. And going down through that deep valley with, I think, I had four men with me on this patrol, we were down in this deep woods and you could hear the noise, *crunch, crunch, crunch* in the snow and couldn't imagine what it was, but it was very quiet, and finally it was a bunch of wild boars that were coming through the woods, and of course, that was a great relief to us because [laughs] we envisioned that we were going to run into a German patrol. But we did eventually get up to the 7<sup>th</sup> Armored group and made contact with them and told them our position and asked about theirs and what their plans were and so forth because we had no form of communication; we had lost all that. We didn't have a radio that worked anymore; we relied pretty much upon just things that we—carrying messages back and forth and so on. It was a very hectic time. That position too eventually became know as the "Goose Egg." There were elements of 7<sup>th</sup> Armored, elements of the 9<sup>th</sup> Regiment Armored, our regiment, the 424<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, and several of the other of the units that were way out on a long, thin kind of peninsula sticking out into the German lines, and we were being cut off there. So again we had to withdraw because they were around behind us. I say that's when I found out the infantry protects the armored, not the armored protects the infantry, because we had to cover their withdrawal until they got the armored out of there, and when the armored was gone then we could pull out, and that was a very difficult thing to do because roads, of course, were very poor, lots of snow and it was a very difficult time. There was a rather interesting thing. When the Battle of the Bulge started on the 16<sup>th</sup> we lost our kitchens that very first day so we had no hot food, rations were very slim, but I had a very resourceful jeep driver. We had one jeep that was left, and he went back to get some supplies, whatever he could find, ammunition or food or something, and he came, showed up, and he had a sack of rice. So on Christmas day we had a sack of rice that we cooked in our helmets, and somewhere he had relieved, I imagine, a general officer [a high ranking officer] someplace, of a bottle of gin. So the few of us sat around, and we ate our rice, and we had a bottle of gin, and as his

commanding officer I didn't ask him where he got it. We [laughs] were just thankful that he found it. Also, Christmas day, in that position at Manhay there, just before we withdrew, the chaplain showed up with his jeep, and we had a very short Christmas day service on the hood of his jeep, and probably the most impressive church service I've ever been to in my life because the Germans were just a few hundred yards away. After we left there, pulled back, again we were sent a little bit north of there to an area around Stavelot [Belgium]. I can't remember a great deal about that. We didn't do much there. We were in a holding position, and the line was stabilized, and by that time it was into January. And the next time that we were really committed to battle, our particular unit, was near Wanne, which is a short distance from Stavelot. We moved up to a very small town, Adawanne [??], and we were there for a few days and I led a patrol there again into the next village which was Lavaux, because that's where the Germans were entrenched, and I led the patrol there, of course on orders from the battalion commander, to try and determine their defenses and also to zero in on artillery fire, and again, as I mentioned, we didn't have any form of communication other telephone wires, no radios. So on the patrol we strung telephone wire all the way through the woods, and when we got to the edge of the little town of Lavaux then of course I could call in over the telephone and zero in the artillery, and we zeroed in at the various road junctions on the edge of the woods where the Germans were entrenched and so on. And then we turned back to our lines. The next morning we jumped off and attacked. It was our particular regiment, the 424<sup>th</sup>, and on our right, I believe, was the 508<sup>th</sup> Paratrooper Regiment [Parachute Infantry Regiment], and we attacked the town of Lavaux. At that particular spot Lavaux was taken quite easily. We went through Lavaux on up a hill, and then we got into the woods and we met some very stiff resistance there. One officer that I had with me at that time, another new officer, was killed there, and Sergeant Rifleman, Wallace Rifleman. He was from Green Bay. He was the first sergeant. Had originally been in the 423<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Regiment, one of the regiments that was lost during the Battle of the Bulge, but he got out, and he had been reassigned to my company as a first sergeant. And he did such a wonderful job there in helping us break through that forest area that he was recommended for the Silver Star, and I believe he did receive it later on. We did eventually clear the Germans out of that wooded area and went down over the hill and farther through the woods approaching the community of Coulèe. There they caught us in the woods with very heavy artillery fire and mortar fire, and when you are in a wooded area like that with the shells bursting in the trees you take tremendous casualties, and we had no cover 'cause we were on the attack. We took a terrible beating there: many, many casualties until evening and then we withdrew back towards Wanne. Then I have more or less of a blank. I can't remember. I know that I ended up in the hospital with pneumonia for a while or flu or something. [laughs] But anyway I was evacuated, and when I rejoined my unit, by that time it was around the 1<sup>st</sup> of February, and we were committed to battle near Losheim [Germany], and this was right on the Siegfried Line where the German had built all these dragon's

teeth to stop the tanks and a lot of pillboxes, and we spent quite a few days there in a position getting ready to attack. While we were in that position we took various practice runs on attacking the pillboxes because we were going to have to crack those in order to get through. It was starting to thaw then, and in the heavy evergreens there were a lot of snow hanging on the trees, and night was a particularly terrifying time because you were always so constantly on the alert for patrols coming at you or the Germans possibly being in attack and so on, and you hear the snow coming off the trees and it would go *plop, plop*, and you were always envisioning that somebody was walking out there in the snow. We also had put out, in front of our position we put out trip flares, which would of course, if somebody would trip the wire the flare would go up in the air and light up the landscape so you could see. Once in a while we had Germans that were tripping the flares, but we also had these small European deer that would trip the flares, so they kept us very nervous [laughs] during the course of the night too. But eventually we did attack, the whole line attack, and the whole front moved forward, and our particular unit stayed on the attack until we reached an area near Berk, and that's as far as our particular unit went; we didn't go any farther than that. The attack then continued on towards Remagen and the bridgehead, of course, Remagen. But our unit was pulled off the line at that time. At that time, now, that was the latter part of February. I remember we were in a rear area then because as mentioned the front line moved forward, and they came in and set up some tents, started heating hot water, and we walked into the tent on one end, took off all of our clothes, got a brief shower, walked to the other end of the tent, and they gave us clean clothes, and that was the first time we had been out of those clothes in six weeks; first time we had a chance [laugh] to get a shower in six weeks. We had started getting some food of course then, better food too.

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tified

Woman: Don, I am going to have you stop a minute.

Beseler: Okay. [Approx. 25 sec. pause in recording] [Laughs] How you gonna to start this out?

Piggins: Tess will let us know—.

Beseler: No. I say, how are you gonna start—.

Piggins: Oh, I guess I'll just ask you to tell me the story of that money that you had to carry around.

Beseler: Okay.

Uniden-  
tified



Woman: Whenever you're ready.

Piggins: Okay, could you tell me about that money you had to carry around?

Beseler: Well, on December 16<sup>th</sup> when the Bulge started I was the payroll officer for our particular company, and we just received the payroll and all the money. The money was always in cash, and of course the morning of the 16<sup>th</sup> when it started, we didn't have time to pay anybody, and the money was left in the company clerk's desk, first sergeant's desk, 'cause when we went up to the front line we fully expected to be back that evening so we could have supper. You know we were very naïve, but as it turned out, of course, we didn't get back, and the company clerk, a man by the name of John Roverano, stuffed all the money into an ammunition bag, and he carried it around with him for quite a while, and then he made me aware after a while that he had all this money, and it wasn't till, oh, about the 1st of February when I finally found a way to get rid of that money and turned it in to our regimental command post, and I got a receipt, in my possession, for 157,000 some odd French francs pertaining to enlisted men that were missing in action. Had the money on, and of course I didn't have anybody to pay 'cause so many of the men were lost. Might add too that when that Bulge started, I say, there was so much confusion, and the Germans hit so hard and with such force, and our line was so thin, there were no reserves beyond us, beyond the company reserves, there were no divisions or anything like that else behind us to help us. We lost everything. We lost our kitchens, and we had K-rations which came in a box that looked like a cracker jack box, and in there, there was usually a can of potted meat or cheese, four crackers, four cigarettes, maybe a fruit bar, a tea or a bullion cube, and toilet tissue, and you got three of those a day. One was labeled breakfast, one's lunch, and one's dinner, and you couldn't tell the difference, but any rate, we ate those for better part of a month, I think, and then we finally got kitchens again. One of the men that survived all this was our mess sergeant, and he was an extremely good mess sergeant. He was going to treat us very well, and he cooked up hundreds of pancakes and oatmeal in which they dumped a lot of fruit cocktail that they got. So our first hot meal in probably over a month consisted of pancakes and this tremendous amount of oatmeal, and we ate, and we ate, and we ate, and because we had been living on these K-rations all this time our systems couldn't take it. So we were [laughs] extremely sick for about twenty-four hours. So that didn't work out so well, but after that we had good food. But it was a bad situation, because I mentioned, there was so much confusion, and it seemed like the Germans were everywhere. We were out of supplies, we couldn't get anything to defend ourselves against the tanks with, could get very little ammunition. We didn't get an awful lot of food. The weather was bad; it snowed, snowed a lot, got very cold. I think it got down around ten below zero. We were outside all the time. We finally got our white camouflage uniforms just about the time that the snow was melting in the spring of the year, around when we were at

Losheim. By that time, of course, there were bare patches around in the woods, and we no longer needed white uniforms, but that's when we got 'em.

Piggins: Would you say that the American commanders were prepared to meet that crisis?

Beseler: I've read books by Eisenhower, by Patton, by many of Bradley, and I know there are different opinions, but I think that they were not prepared. We were put on the line as a green division; we had never been in combat, early in December, and our division was spread over many, many, many miles, probably three or four times as many miles as a division should be spread over. We were in the Ardennes. This was an area that was very hard for any army to attack through, and I think that our command just felt that the attack would not come through that particular area, and when it did come they were not prepared for it, and that's why the Germans got as far as they did. That's a personal opinion. Of course, to complicate things when the attacks started the weather turned so bad. Because of the area, the terrain, very hilly terrain, very narrow roads, lots of woods, so the armored could not move, we were very much confined to the woods, I mean to the roads. They couldn't get up to the front to help us. We were told that the help was constantly coming, but it never did arrive. It seemed like it was almost the first two weeks before we finally got some help. The 9<sup>th</sup> Armored Division, the 7<sup>th</sup> Armored Division, were on the move to get up there, but it just seemed they didn't get there on time. It wasn't their fault. It's just that the conditions were so bad.

Piggins: Given the unpreparedness and the conditions, the weather and so forth, it sounds as if the Americans did an incredible job under the conditions. How do you feel about that? Did the Americans give a good account of themselves? Did the citizen soldier in it to an extent was the—

Beseler: I think that they did very well. There were also many veteran groups on the frontline, the 28<sup>th</sup> Division, and there were some paratrooper units on there, divisions that had been on the frontline a long time. We happened to be the green division, but considering the circumstances, I think they did very well. It was a matter of setting up a defensive position, holding as long as you could, and then falling back again, falling back until it could all be reorganized and more divisions brought in, more troops and more supplies, and then to finally stop the Germans, and then turned it around and start on the attack and push the bulge back. It just seems like the high command didn't want to believe that anything could happen like that because I know our troops, our particular division had heard the activity, night after night, those people that were on the front line. They reported this back, and nobody seemed to believe us. They just attributed to the fact that, well, we're green troops, you're hearing things. So they didn't really take us seriously, at least it seemed that way. So because there was a lot of German activity and they did move up a lot of heavy armored divisions and infantry divisions, and they

moved it at night, and you could hear that. You can't move things like that without a lot of racket. But nobody paid attention it seems. Or else there's another theory that maybe they just wanted to let them come through and try to create a bulge and then cut them off, which in a sense is what did happen. But it was at the sacrifice of a lot of troops and a lot of men, because our division lost out of three regiments, a division is roughly 13-14,000 men and divided into three regiments, then with artillery support and other support troops, and we lost two full regiments. Now that's about 8,000 men that we lost in a matter of a few days. And as I mentioned, in my particular company of a 197 men we were down to twenty or twenty-one men within a matter of a few days. **[End of Side A]**

Piggins: So the tremendous losses would certainly be a big feature of the Bulge Battle—.

Beseler: Oh yes.

Piggins: The weather conditions. Are there other important features you would say that would characterize that battle?

Beseler: Well, I think that you have to give the Germans a great deal of credit. They had a very well organized attack, and they infiltrated, they came in with English speaking men, they came through our lines, they paratroopered behind the lines as I recall, and they were in American uniforms, and they created havoc and confusion back there. There's stories—now, I didn't witness this, but there's stories about the fact that as these lines of support troops were moving up to the front to help that these people directed them down dead end roads and things like that. 'Course you can imagine very narrow roads and lots of snow, and they'd get a whole convoy going down the wrong road and have to try turn them around and get them back out, all that sort of thing. So the Germans did very well. I think if they had been successful in capturing a huge amount of supplies, which they got very close to, gasoline supplies, that they would have moved a lot farther than they did. They got within just a few miles of several million gallons of gasoline and missed it. [laughs] If they'd a got that they would of probably could of supplied their tanks. That was one of the problems they had, they ran out of fuel. They were good fighters though.

Piggins: You talked about the Germans who infiltrated. Did they speak English pretty well?

Beseler: Oh yes. They were treated more or less as, well, they weren't given very good treatment then because when you put on the other side's uniform then you no longer deserve the privileges of a soldier when you are captured.

Piggins: You talked about them missing the gasoline, was that because of the route they took? They were cut off?

Beseler: No, they just took a different route, and all this gasoline was stored in cans, these five gallon jerry cans. Thousands and thousands of cans of gasoline were stored along this one route in the woods, in the deep woods, and they just went another direction, they went around it. They missed it and if they had found that it would have been, I think, a different story. They'd have probably gotten all the way to Antwerp where they [laughs] had planned on going.

Piggins: Well, thank you—.

Beseler: You're welcome.

Piggins: We covered all of the questions. It's great.

**[End of Interview]**