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“Setting the World On Fire”: The Wartime Story of Rudolph Bigda

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HIS 490

This paper examines the World War II experiences of Rudolph Bigda, one of Bryant University's oldest living alumni. His story sheds new light on the remarkable accomplishments of the Bryant Service Club, a student organization formed in March 1942 by Bryant students for Bryant alumni serving their country during World War II. The purpose of the club was to send letters, cigarettes, candy, cookies and hand-knitted articles to Bryant men and women serving in the U.S. military. By the end of the war, approximately 500 alumni serving both stateside and abroad had received letters and packages from the club.

The story of Rudy Bigda came to light in the fall of 2008 when some 1400 letters written by Bryant alumni to the Bryant Service Club were discovered in an underground storage area of the Bryant University Library. Subsequently, the *Providence Journal* featured a heartwarming story about these letters on the front page of the December 24, 2008 edition of the paper. The June 29, 2009 issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education* also ran a story on these letters. In addition, The Berkeley Electronic Press highlighted this collection in the Fall 2009 issue of the *Digital Commons Subscriber Newsletter*.

Between July 1942 and November 1944, Rudy Bigda wrote 2 regular letters, 2 V-Mail letters, and 3 post cards to the Bryant Service Club thanking the club for the gifts that he had received and informing the club of his whereabouts and military activities. This paper is based on these letters, a three-hour oral history interview and video recording that occurred on June 24, 2009 at Bigda's home in Holyoke, Massachusetts, and approximately 8 follow-up telephone interviews.

Rudolph A. Bigda attended Bryant College at the peak of the Great Depression in 1933 and graduated from its two-year program Business Administration in 1935. When Rudy Bigda

enrolled at Bryant College, it was located on Fountain Street in downtown Providence, Rhode Island. Classrooms were situated in an eight-story building with one elevator.¹ In a recent interview, he remarked:

You had to climb very quickly every morning because everything was very crowded. If you were late for class, you were not allowed in.²

In 1933, Bryant consisted mostly of commuter students. Unlike the current class schedule where multiple breaks and vacations are a norm, Bryant students attended class for 48 to 50 weeks each year. A 1930s *Bryant College Catalog* stated: "It is a college education as thorough and scholarly as that afforded by the older type classical college in its field, but the curriculum is especially planned to satisfy the practical and exacting demands of business." The motto of Bryant College was, "from campus to career in two years."³

While at Bryant, Rudy proved himself to be an excellent student. Today, some seventy-five years later, he still clearly remembers the rigors of his Bryant education, especially the demands of Professor Jeremiah Barber.

Rudy missed Professor Barber's final exam in law due to his working schedule. Professor Barber kindly rescheduled Rudy's exam. To make up the final exam, Rudy traveled to Newport to have lunch with his law professor and then take the exam. He completed the scheduled three-hour exam in approximately one hour. The confident Rudy turned in his exam and got every question correct. When Professor Barber returned the test to Rudy, his score was a

¹ Valerie Quinney, *Bryant College: The First 125 Years* (East Greenwich: Meridian Printing, 1988).

² Rudy A. Bigda, interview by author, June 24, 2009.

³ Valerie Quinney, *Bryant College: The First 125 Years* (East Greenwich: Meridian Printing, 1988), 36.

90 percent. In awe, Rudy questioned Barber's grading criterion. Barber responded, "You got every question correct; however, I'm giving you a 90. I have never given anyone a 100 in my life and I am not starting with you," If Rudy had received a 100 on his exam, he would have graduated number one in his class.

At Bryant, Rudy learned a valuable lesson that would later help him succeed in the Army and in his career as a businessman. Under the tutelage of Bryant professors, such as Professor Barber, he learned the value of teaching, and he sharpened his teaching skills, first in the military and later in the world of business.

While remaining at the top of his class, Rudy was able to take part of some social activities while remaining at the top of his class. Rudy, along with some of his classmates created a fraternity. Members of the fraternity revealed their involvement by pinning a matchstick to the collars of their dress coats. When describing it some seventy five years later Rudy declared:

It was the Great Depression. None of us could afford anything else so we used matchsticks. But we did go to the local bowling alleys for the nickel beers and ten cent charge to bowl a string.

In 1935, Rudy graduated Magna Cum Laude and was ready to "set the world on fire"⁴. The Great Depression had crippled the United States economy. At the height of the Depression, approximately 25 percent of the work force was unemployed. Rudy was fortunate to be hired as a mail boy with Universal Credit in Springfield, Massachusetts. In 1936, he started working for the American Writing Paper Company in the payroll department in Holyoke, Massachusetts. In

⁴ Rudy A. Bigda, e-mail message to author, October 8, 2009.

1940, he was offered a job with the Public Loan Company, also in Holyoke, as an assistant manager.

On September 6, 1940, Congress enacted the first peacetime draft in U.S. history, the Selective Training and Service Act of 1940. The act required "men between the ages of 21 and 30 to register with local draft boards."⁵ As the draft continued, more of Rudy's close friends were called into the armed services. Rather than be drafted, in March 1941, Rudy decided to volunteer for the armed services.⁶

At the start of Rudy's military career, he aspired to join the Naval Air Corps. To join the Air Corps, Rudy traveled to Squantum, Massachusetts, the location of a Naval Air Corps Reserve base. There he took a written exam and physical and was told to wait for further instruction. Rudy waited until mid June and still heard nothing from the Naval Air Corps. Rather than waiting any longer, he signed up with the Army.

Rudy joined the Army in June 1941. He was sent to Fort Devins, Massachusetts to take an intelligence exam. Soon after completion of the exam, Rudy was on a train headed to Fort Lee, Virginia for thirteen weeks of basic training.

Following basic training, Rudy was assigned to the Army War College in Washington, D.C. as a commissary accountant. Using his Bryant College education in business and accountancy skills, Rudy was a valuable accountant. While in Washington, Rudy received his first gift from the Bryant Service Club (B.S.C.), a student-led organization established in 1942

⁵ "Use of the Draft," *Selective Service*, <http://www.selectiveservice.us/military-draft/7-use.shtml> (accessed October 15, 2009).

⁶ Rudy would later find out his number was not called until 1945.

that was dedicated to sending letters, cigarettes, clothes, and other key wartime goods to Bryant Alumni in the service. On July 27, 1942 Rudy kindly commented:

It was certainly with a feeling of guilt that I opened your thoughtful and generous gift....Words fail to express my appreciation of the good-fellowship evidenced by the present classes, and evidently they are just as good a 'gang' as the one that graduated in 1935. I surely hope that they all fully appreciate the excellent facilities and opportunities afforded them at the new Bryant, which I was privileged to visit, as much as we of '35 appreciated the old Bryant.⁷

After spending a year at the Army War College, Rudy desperately wanted a transfer to the battlefield where he would be part of the fighting forces. He felt that his work as an accountant belonged to someone not qualified for combat duty. To leave the Army War College, Rudy turned to Officer Candidate School (O.C.S.). In order for Rudy to attend O.C.S., his commanding officer needed to endorse him, but he refused to do so because Rudy was doing a "superb job"⁸ and did not want to lose him.

Eventually, Rudy talked his commanding officer into nominating him, along with twenty-two other individuals competing for one open position for O.C.S. To be selected, the twenty-three individuals took an oral exam led by a board of officers, which included four generals and a colonel. The candidates were asked a series of difficult questions on military protocol and

⁷ Rudy A. Bigda, letter to Bryant Service Club, July 27, 1942, <http://digitalcommons.bryant.edu/> (accessed October 15, 2009).

⁸ Rudy A. Bigda, interview by author, June 24, 2009.

strategy. When asked questions, the aspiring candidates were ordered to answer each question asked by the board of officers by their rank. Rudy remarked:

Somehow, I muddled through that...and I got the appointment to Fort Lee for Officer Candidate School for three months.⁹

Rather than informing his family of his appointment, Rudy was afraid to notify those that cared for him about his accomplishment. When discussing the situation some sixty six years later:

I didn't tell my father, I told nobody about it because if I flunked out [of O.C.S.], I did not want to tell them I flunked out.¹⁰

Late in 1942, he attended O.C.S. at Fort Lee, Virginia. This accelerated wartime O.C.S. program transformed a soldier into an officer in just 90 days. It was a very rigorous training program and its graduates were known as "ninety day wonders." In O.C.S., pressure was put candidates deliberately to weed out individuals that could not meet the demands of the course.¹¹ Fortunately, Rudy successfully completed the three-month program. He was one of 24,561 men who graduated from Officer Candidate School at Fort Lee during the World War II era.¹²

Rudy then returned to Springfield, Massachusetts by train where his father was waiting for him. According to Rudy:

⁹ Rudy A. Bigda, interview by author, June 24, 2009.

¹⁰ Rudy A. Bigda, interview by author, June 24, 2009.

¹¹ "Students who had officer qualifications but who needed additional military training were taken out of their officer candidate classes and placed in development platoons. If a man overcame his deficiency within a two-week period, he was enrolled in the next officer candidate class....Between July 1940 and January 1946, the Officer Candidate School enrolled 29,660 students and graduated 24,561."

¹² Colonel Lloyd L. Cobb, "The Quartermaster School: Past and Present," *The Quartermaster Review*: May-June (1946): http://www.qmmuseum.lee.army.mil/WWII/qm_school.htm (accessed October 16, 2009).

I got off the train in Springfield. I think my father was about to turn me in for impersonating an officer. He couldn't believe I became an officer.¹³

After completing O.C.S., Rudy was assigned to the Quartermaster Corps. At the time, there were two quartermaster companies in need of a lieutenant, the 2097th and 2098th. The commanding officers flipped a coin to decide Rudy's fate. Rudy was assigned to the 2098th Quartermaster Trucking Company (2098th). He recently reminisced:

A flip of a coin decided my fate. I went to Louisiana and the 2097th went to the Pacific and lost all their men in a beach landing, one-hundred percent casualties.¹⁴

In the summer of 1943, Rudy traveled to Baton Rouge, Louisiana with the 2098th for maneuvers. He was not involved in the famous Louisiana Maneuvers that took place in 1941 when central Louisiana was the site of the largest peacetime training maneuvers in United States history. However, like those that took place in 1941, the smaller maneuvers in 1943 were used for the preparation of American forces in the war in Europe. The maneuvers prepared commanders for possible reconnaissance and troop supply problems in battlefield conditions.¹⁵

While in charge of the 2098th, Rudy used different strategies to keep morale high and teach lessons for future combat circumstances. In order to keep his men in top psychological health, he used stress relief techniques when times became exhausting. When the rigorous training seemed to wear down on the men, Rudy would create a diversion. For example:

¹³ Rudy A. Bigda, interview by author, June 24, 2009.

¹⁴ Rudy A. Bigda, interview by author, June 24, 2009.

¹⁵ "The Louisiana Maneuvers," *Camp Livingston Louisiana*, <http://camp-livingston.winnfreenet.com/lam.php> (accessed October 16, 2009).

I greased a pig and told the men they would get five dollars if they caught the pig and off the pig went into the swamps, and off the men went in after it. Little did I know that water moccasins are poisonous? We had to alert the ambulance corps in south eastern Louisiana to take snake-bite victims to the Army hospital.¹⁶

The next day, Rudy had to explain to his commanding officers how he tied up the entire ambulance corps in one day. The inspector general commended Rudy on his idea, but informed him to have better awareness of the dangers of the local environment.

When the men were in training, Rudy would attempt to best prepare his men for future combat scenarios. This included teaching lessons, lecturing, and always thinking ahead of his men. According to Rudy, his men would sometime store food in their issued gas masks. In Rudy's words:

The men needed training and a lesson to take oranges out of their gas masks containers. I had one of the local air corps unit strife us with tear gas. Needless to say, there were only a few people who had [workable]gas masks while the others learned their lesson to keep their gas masks [clean]... rather than [stuffed with]oranges.¹⁷

During this period, he was transferred to different branches to learn different skill sets in conjunction with his duties as a quartermaster officer, but he was always reunited with the 2098th after completing these courses. The 2098th participated in simulated travel under combat situations throughout the United States. As Rudy mentioned in his postcard to the Bryant

¹⁶ Rudy A. Bigda, interview by author, June 24, 2009.

¹⁷ Rudy A. Bigda, interview by author, June 24, 2009.

Service Club dated August 3, 1943, he had traveled to "22 states in 3 months – on continual maneuvers – not stopping in any one place for more than 9 days and living the most of this time under simulated combat conditions."

He also noted that the travel and constant training was excessive and that he was ready to be part of the United States fighting forces. In that same postcard, he wrote, "My chief gripe to date has been the fact that I haven't left for an actual theatre of operations." However, aside from his personal aggravation, he once again commended the kindness of the B.S.C.:

I will close here with deepest appreciation and thanks to each and

every one of you for your thoughtfulness. I only hope that the day

is not far off that I may personally thank you all.¹⁸

In December 1943, Rudy and the 2098th were shipped to England. The unit left Plymouth, Massachusetts and was shipped to the 4th Strategic Air Depot near Ipswich, England. In the months leading up to the D-Day Invasion of June 6, 1944, Rudy, along with approximately 2 million other U.S. and Canadian soldiers, was shipped to England to prepare for a cross-Channel attack. According to Michael E. Haskew, editor of *World War II* magazine, "before Allied forces in the West were strong enough to gain and maintain a lodgment on the European continent, a massive buildup of supplies were required". The buildup of fighting men and equipment was codename Operation Bolero.¹⁹

Rudy vividly remembers his first night at the 4th Strategic Air Depot in Ipswich when the German Luftwaffe staged an air raid over London. Located only 67 miles northeast of London,

¹⁸ Rudy A. Bigda, letter to Bryant Service Club, August 3, 1943, <http://digitalcommons.bryant.edu/> (accessed October 17, 2009).

¹⁹ Michael E. Haskew, "Into the Fire," *World War II* (July 2000): <http://www.historynet.com/world-war-ii-july-2000-from-the-editor.htm/2> (accessed October 13, 2009).

the 4th Strategic Air Depot was vulnerable to German aircraft returning to Nazi occupied Europe after bombing London. Rudy recalled in our interview:

If the bombers had any bombs left after their run to London, they would drop the leftovers on any place they could see lights on the ground. This night, the first night I was in Ipswich, I was out in the tarmac watching the planes. Then one bomb landed about 500 yards away from me. The concussion from that one bomb blew off my helmet and knocked me down on my back.²⁰

When the explosion knocked him over, he realized he was in a war zone and took more precaution during future air raids to get his distance from possible targets.

While in England, Rudy volunteered the 2098th to supply photographic paper for military airplanes throughout England whose pilots were assigned to take surveillance photographs of enemy movements. The unit was forced to travel at night under "black out" conditions in order to avoid getting bombed by enemy planes.

In November 1944, Rudy was reassigned to the 1582nd Quartermaster Logistics Battalion. A month later, the 1582nd was sent to France. During the turbulent weather, the 1582nd was forced to stay in the English Channel for two nights. The rough seas of the Channel forced the members of the 1582nd to chain the trucks to the deck to prevent any harm to the soldiers on the ship or to prevent losing them overboard. Through the trip, one of the chains snapped. To avoid a catastrophe Rudy quickly ordered the crane operator on the ship to dump the loose truck into the ocean. He commented:

²⁰ Rudy A. Bigda, interview by author, June 24, 2009.

We had to write off the truck but I really signed off for two trucks. The commander of the boat wanted a truck and I wanted some fresh food. We traded the truck for chickens. I signed off a truck and he signed me off a load of chickens. The next day, we were getting off the landing craft. The landing craft lands, the ramp dropped, and the first truck went off and disappeared. We landed on a rock forty feet from shore and the truck went into fifteen feet of water. That was another truck we had to write off.²¹

When the 1582th arrived in Cherbourg, France, Rudy had 98 men, 52 trucks, and more importantly 150 freshly-slaughtered chickens, but no refrigeration. From that point, 1582nd had chicken for every meal: breakfast, lunch, and supper. When the 1582nd started its convoy, it did not have the luxury of having constant communication with Allied commanders and was forced to run on fragmentary orders. The unit ran on 20 miles worth of orders. After completing those orders, they would be assigned new orders and the process would continue.

While in Europe, Rudy and the 1582nd were paired with what was then called a "colored" trucking company. Rudy vividly remembers his experience with two of these soldiers from Brooklyn:

Two colored fellows from Brooklyn come sprinting into the parking area with a jeep and cow on it. They went on to tell me about the deer they shot. Needless to say, there was a French farmer right behind the jeep telling me they shot his cow. We had

²¹ Rudy A. Bigda, interview by author, June 24, 2009.

to do quite a bit of paperwork and straighten out the two gentlemen about what a cow looked like and what a deer looked like.²²

The 1582nd was ordered to go as fast as they could. The unit was able to travel an average of 20 miles a day. Like the 2098th Quartermaster Trucking Company, the 1582nd carried photographic paper for airplanes. However, during the Battle of Bulge, the last major German offensive and bloodiest battle of World War II, the 1582nd was ordered to transport the dead and wounded in and out of the battle zone. The Battle of the Bulge was the last major German offensive and bloodiest battles of World War II.²³

After the Battle of the Bulge, which ended in early January 1945, the 1582nd was ordered to stay in northeastern France to be used as a troop transport unit and a rescue group. Rudy was in charge of a mobile reclamation group. The 1582nd ran forty-foot tractor trailers through France, recovering downed aircraft and pilots. The trailers were often the targets of enemy planes.

The unit remained in northeastern France until the war was over on May 8, 1945. At the conclusion of the war, the 1582nd was ordered to join the occupational forces in Germany and be used as a prisoner transport system. To transport the prisoners, the company was ordered to use both their trucks and the train system. Rudy colorfully remembers taking prisoners from Germany and Italy to France.

²² Rudy A. Bigda, interview by author, June 24, 2009.

²³ On December 16, 1944, some 30 German divisions launched a counter offensive against Allied forces in the Ardennes region. The Germans had 2,277 fighting vehicles, 1,500 planes, and 1,322,000 men and an "overall...three-to-one advantage in the Ardennes" (*Citizen Soldiers: The U.S. Army from the Normandy Beaches to the Bulge to the Surrender of Germany*, Ambrose p. 199).

I had two trips to Cherbourg....The trains had huge amounts of soot because they were burning soft coal so after 4 miles everyone looked like Al Jolson.²⁴ Every so often a train would stop and there were no toilet facilities, so everyone would run off the train to the woods. There was no signal of the train starting again, so if you were out in the woods you may be left. As the train commander, you kept losing people who did not make it in time. But you kept gaining some that were left from the train before, so you were always swapping passengers.

Prior to coming back to the United States, soldiers were ordered to get certain immunization shots. Rudy told the story of standing in line and waiting to get his shots while in Cherbourg;

France:

I got into a line and it became rather long. So I was waiting, and it took a long time for the line to get into the building. I made it into the building and a Major came up to me, 'Captain, you did not have to wait in line.' I replied, 'I thought this was the line for the shots.' The Major said, 'No, you have been standing in the V-D line.' I remarked, 'No wonder everyone has been staring at me for the past two hours.'"²⁵

Rudy returned to the United States in the summer of 1945. He left active duty in 1946, at the rank of major. He remained in the reserves until 1972 where he retired as a full colonel. At

²⁴ "Al Jolson," *St. James Encyclopedia of Popular Culture*, vol. 5 (2000), quoted in "Al Jolson," *Public Broadcasting Service*, http://www.pbs.org/wnet/broadway/stars/jolson_a.html (accessed October 15, 2009).

²⁵ Rudy A. Bigda, interview by author, June 24, 2009.

the age of ninety three Rudy remains active and the bright student he was some seventy six years ago while walking on Bryant College campus for the first time. He concluded our interview by stating:

There is no end to what a person can learn. I always try to find something new that I did not know before. And I attribute that quality to my success at Bryant, in the military, and in life.²⁶

Rudy remains a proud alumnus and supporter of Bryant University. On October 3, 2009, in return for his long-standing support of his alma-mater, Bryant University commemorated Rudy on Homecoming at the football game against Wagner College.

²⁶ Rudy A. Bigda, interview by author, June 24, 2009.

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