Transcription: Robert Bearden

My name is Tom Single. I'm with the General Land Office. Today is August the 7th, 2008, and it's approximately 1 o'clock p.m., and I am interviewing Robert Bearden by telephone interview. I am located at the General Land Office and Mr. Bearden is at his home. This interview is in support of the Voices of Veterans Oral History Program, the State of Texas Veterans Land Board. The purpose is to create a permanent record of military service experiences of veterans. Mr. Bearden, as you know, I am about to interview you relating to your military experiences. The interview is by telephone and I will be using a tape recorder to record this interview. The interview will be transcribed and made a part of the permanent record of the Veterans Land Board in Austin, Texas. Does the Veterans Land Board have your permission and consent to conduct this interview and to make it a part of the permanent records of the Veterans Land Board?

Robert Bearden: They do have my permission.

Just generally, the purpose of the interview is to record your recollections of your military experience. We will follow somewhat a question and answer format, but please feel free to expand on your answers, and add anything that you think may be helpful in refreshing your recollections so that future generations will have the opportunity to know what it was like for you during your military life and how those experiences shaped your life since then. We understand that some of the experiences may be difficult to discuss, and if so you are free to limit the interview to the extent you are comfortable in relating those experiences. Do we understand all that?

Robert Bearden: Understand it, I think I do, yes.

OK. Am I coming across clear enough for you? I know you have a little hearing problem.

Robert Bearden: No, no, you're coming across very clear. That's fine.

OK good. All right, let us then begin. Would you give me your name and present address please?

Robert Bearden: My name is Robert L. Bearden. I go by Bob. 5950 Lakeside, Belton, TX 76513.

And Mr. Bearden, how old are you?

Robert Bearden: I'll be 86 on August the 20th.

Ah, birthday coming up. Could you give me some family information about where you were born and your parents and siblings?

Robert Bearden: I was born in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in 1922. I had one sister, and when the Depression hit up there, my father moved us from Tulsa to Irving, Texas, where we had lodging and meals. And from there we bounced around all over the United States. I started school in Oakland, California, in kindergarten. I went to probably six schools in Fort Worth, and as many in Dallas before I was a senior in Adamson High School in Dallas.

And why was it that you were around the country?

Robert Bearden: Well, my dad was trying to make a living and he was in insurance, besides the oil business, but the oil business went south in Oklahoma. He came and took an invitation, he had some experience in life insurance, and he came to come to Texas to try to sell hospitalization insurance, because it was just a matter of scrambling to make a dollar a day, which he gave my mother for operating our home every day.

And this was the time of the Depression.

Robert Bearden: Very much so.

And could you tell me what was your education before you entered the military?

Robert Bearden: I was a senior in high school about six weeks before graduation when my National Guard unit, F Company 144th Infantry, 36th Division, was called up and they took me out of high school so I did not finish high school at that time.

OK, and do you recall approximately what date that would have been?

Robert Bearden: I think it was probably we were, I joined the National Guard July 20, 1940, and I think we were called up November 20, 1940.

1940. So your unit was called to active duty and this was a full year before Pearl Harbor.

Robert Bearden: Absolutely.

OK, and how did you, let's put it this way, how did you get into the military? How did you get into the National Guard and why?

Robert Bearden: Well, I was making 12 and a half cents at a grocery store and a fella told me that if I joined the National Guard and would meet with the unit every Saturday morning for four hours, I'd get a dollar. So that's 25 cents an hour. I just thought it was a better deal, and my father assured me that that was a bad deal, that they likely would get called up like they did in World War I, and of course I told him he didn't know what he was talking about. So his prophecy was right on about just little or no time later, like November we were called up and taken to Camp Bowie, Texas. And at Camp Bowie, what I mean it's Brownwood, Texas, which is Camp Bowie, the site of Camp Bowie.

What was the call up due to? Why was your unit called to active duty, and was this -?

Robert Bearden: Well of course Reserves and National Guard, that's what they're for is for quick implementation of U.S. Army. The Army was really depleted at the time and it became very obvious that the world was in such a turmoil that with Hitler doing his thing all across Europe and the Japanese just doing the same thing out on that end of the world that we needed to start building an Army, and indeed we were almost too late.

So this was a part of a general call up of Reservists and National Guardsmen?

Robert Bearden: I think that Franklin Roosevelt called up the entire Reserve and National Guard component and initiated the draft.

OK. And at that time when you were called up, were you called up for a specific time?

Robert Bearden: Oh yes, I was gonna go do one year. So they had a song at that time, I'll Be Back in a Year, Little Darling, and everyone was just #1 on the hit parade, and it just took me 4 years, 11 months, and 20 days to get my year done.

Just a little longer. OK, so you were called to active duty. I assume when you joined the National Guard you were not anticipating that that was going to happen to you so soon?

Robert Bearden: No, I wasn't.

OK. Before you were activated, what were you basically doing in the National Guard?

Robert Bearden: Well, I had not been in long enough to have much experience, but I did make a huge Louisiana maneuver, and that's my first experience was to take off, and of course then I'm working essentially every day, so I came back, I think we got $21 for that experience. And I became, initially I became what they called a runner, or a dog robber. Now a dog robber was somebody that would take care of an officer in the field, like set up his tent and clean his weapon and do all those things for him like that, and I became a runner which means that I ran from unit to unit because we had very poor communications, and so from that, I became interested or they assigned me to a mortar squad, a 60 mm mortar squad. So before long, I became an authority on the 60 mm mortar, and I was teaching the mortar for a year before I'd ever seen one.

OK, could you tell me what that is for those who don't know.

Robert Bearden: Well, it's the nearest thing an Infantry soldier has to an artillery piece. The round goes up in the air and it's shaped like a little rocket. It spins on end and it goes up in the air and travels to its destination however you set the ammunition, and the way the tube is inclined determines how far you can fire it. But it's good for up to about 600 yards, and it doesn't blow down a building, but it sends out a lot of shrapnel.

OK, could you tell me before you went to the military while you were in school, were you involved in any sports or anything like that?

Robert Bearden: Yes, I boxed in the Golden Gloves.

You boxed in the Golden Gloves?

Robert Bearden: In Dallas, yes.

Ah, that's pretty good.

Robert Bearden: And then I ran track. I was not big enough. I only weighed probably 120 pounds maybe when I went in the Army.

How tall were you?

Robert Bearden: I was about 5'7", 5'7-1/2". I ran the mile for Adamson High School, and before I went into the service, I ran a 4-40 mile, which was pretty good.

That was pretty good back then.

Robert Bearden: Yes.

OK. Do you recall once you got activated, did you have basic training anywhere?

Robert Bearden: Well yes, our National Guard, before we were moved to Brownwood, we started doing things like weapons. We had the 03 rifle. Actually the first rifle I had was a French rifle, but then we went to the Remington 03, and that was our standard rifle, the rifle that most of our troops used in World War I, and then we were operating out of an armory in Dallas on Ackerat Street in Dallas, so there wasn't much we could do in terms of we would go out and try to do close order drills. That was a big thing then. And just as an obedience training system. Then we worked on cleaning weapons and setting up shelter half tents where two men each have a shelter half and they make a tent out of it, and things like that until we went to Louisiana, and we got to Louisiana, until we went on maneuvers we got back, soon we went to Brownwood to Camp Bowie and moved into tents, and we stayed there for a year. All during that time, it was going to the field, long marches 20-30 miles a day, and just hard work in terms of getting men in shape physically and learning our weapons and that sort of thing. And then came Pearl Harbor.

How did you take to the Army once you got activated and got involved in it?

Robert Bearden: I was almost ashamed to admit it that I loved it.

You loved it.

Robert Bearden: Absolutely.

And what was it about it that caused you to love it?

Robert Bearden: I don't know, I think I was pretty ornery as a kid, and I think I liked the discipline and I would never have admitted that.

Delivering the discipline or being on the receiving end of the discipline?

Robert Bearden: Well, I was a squad leader and I never had any authority over anybody in my life and here all of a sudden I've got a five-man mortar squad and I am the authority. I'm 17 years old. I had one National Guardsman who was 12 years old. I had another one who was 53 years old. Pappy Sanderson they called him because he was so old, and a 12-year-old, Manual Allan Deaton, was the oldest and the youngest in my squad, and I was their leader. So you can imagine a 17-year-old that's got a squad that ranges from 12 years old, and incidentally he was bigger than me.

How did he get in the Army at 12 years old?

Robert Bearden: His mother signed him in as being 16 I guess. And he was just strictly a goofy little kid. He called himself the Cobra.

And did he stay with you for much of your -

Robert Bearden: I don't know, I cannot tell you when he left us, but I'm sure there were many people anxious to get the Cobra out of our unit because he was constantly doing something crazy, and he kept, we used to punish people at that time by making them dig a 6 by 6 by 6-foot deep hole, and the first sergeant would throw a cigarette butt in or something and then they would close it up. And he stayed digging those holes most all the time, so he was always in trouble, just kid-like things. It was all a joke with him.

Was it ever discovered that he was 12 years old?

Robert Bearden: Yes, they put him out. He stayed three years in the Army I understood, and then he was discharged at 15 with a minority discharge.

That's an amazing story.

Robert Bearden: Crazy, yeah. Incidentally I heard later that he wound up going to ____ Law School and became a lawyer.

Is that right?

Robert Bearden: I never was able to find him, so I don't know if that's true, but that's what I heard from some other National Guard veterans.

OK, while you were doing your training and so forth, what were some of the difficult things that you found yourself dealing with?

Robert Bearden: Well, I can't really say that I had, I am dyslexic, I've always been dyslexic, and so I have no retention and have never had any retention capacity. If I read something, 10 minutes later, I can read a paragraph and 10 minutes later and you could say I'll give you $1,000 if you can tell me what it is, and I couldn't tell you. So I've always had that problem, so any time I had to learn the orders for a guard duty or anything like that, I always had to struggle with it. Any time I started learning to disassemble and reassemble pistols, rifles, machine guns, Browning automatic rifles, I always had a struggle with it but I didn't mind it because it was the price I had to pay to achieve becoming a good soldier and that was important to me. I was a corporal pretty quick and in less than a year I made sergeant because they were really, really hard up for leadership.

Once you got activated, your guard unit got activated and you became a part of the Army, you were trained as a mortar man?

Robert Bearden: Yes.

And then once you completed that training, where did you go and what did you do? And this is still before Pearl Harbor, correct?

Robert Bearden: Yes. Oh, I never in my 4 years, 11 months and 20 days in the service, I never was on any weapon except a 60mm mortar. And it became very obvious that I liked the weapon. It was a pretty good load to carry on marches and things, but I liked it and I liked the way it, I liked what it would do, and I liked what I thought it would do in combat, and it did exactly in

combat in Normandy what I thought it would do, and so I just taught that to my squad, my 5-man squad, to get them to become totally efficient in setting that weapon up and firing it.

Did it take five men to do this?

Robert Bearden: No, but you had to have two men, you had to have a gunner, you had to have me as a squad leader, you had to have a gunner, you had an assistant gunner, and you had two ammunition bearers.

I see.

Robert Bearden: All of them incidentally were inter-trained. Any of them should be able to take my job or a gunner's job, they were able to train to swap out.

So two fed while two operated while one commanded. Is that the way it worked?

Robert Bearden: Yes.

OK, we're still pre-World War II, at least in terms of Pearl Harbor, and let's get to there. Once you were activated and you saw what was happening in the world, did you anticipate that you would be, that the United States would be in war soon?

Robert Bearden: Well, I knew so little, I never read a newspaper and of course that was before TV and that sort of thing, so as a matter of fact I don't recall anybody in our tent ever having a radio. So I didn't know much about what was going on, but I did have an understanding that I wasn't learning that 60mm mortar to win some trophy at a carnival, that I intended it to use on an enemy of the United States government at some point, and I was satisfied with that. I carried a .45 automatic pistol and had access to a .30 caliber rifle, and I fired average or better on every weapon, and fired expert with the .45, so yes, I was, I knew what I was training for and later on I left the 144th Infantry when we were sent to California. When we were sent out to the West Coast, I left the 144th Infantry to go to the paratroopers because I was convinced if I stayed there, I was never going to get in that war, and at the time I really wanted to get to be a part of it.

So how did you get to the West Coast?

Robert Bearden: I think I've heard the number 36 hours after Pearl Harbor, we were, the whole 144th Infantry Regiment of the 36th Infantry Division, Texas National Guard, it was no longer Texas National Guard, it was part of the United States Army, but it's initial designation was 26th Division of the Texas National Guard, and within 36 hours our whole regiment, equipment, everything we had, were on trains from Brownwood, Texas, heading for Seattle, Washington.

Do you recall where you were and what you were doing when the announcement of Pearl Harbor occurred?

Robert Bearden: Absolutely, as a matter of fact we were there yesterday to receive a medal from the City of Brownwood. I was in the theater there in Brownwood, Texas on Sunday afternoon.

This week?

Robert Bearden: Yes.

So you received a medal there this weekend?

Robert Bearden: Let me see what it says here. The greatest generation, valor, sacrifice, fidelity – and on the other side it says Non-commissioned Officers Association of the United States Army of the United States of America, and a real nice gold medal with red, white, and blue.

And you were at that same spot on December 7, 1941?

Robert Bearden: Well, actually we were in a little different spot. What took place this past weekend – no it wasn't this past weekend, it was Sunday. And we were met in one of the Brownwood buildings there, it was a museum – the Coliseum Annex, that's where it was. And there were 7 of us. Actually there were 6 of them that were gonna be presented this medal and I went to see one of the recipients whom we know as a friend, and they discovered that I had more combat experience than all these guys, so they said here, get up here and we want to give you a medal. So they gave me one of their medals.

Right place at the right time!

Robert Bearden: I guess so.

So tell me about December 7, 1941.

Robert Bearden: Well I was in a theater downtown, Sunday afternoon in Brownwood, and all of a sudden they turned the lights up and blanked the screen out and a fella came on the stage with a megaphone and said the United State Forces in Pearl Harbor have been attacked by the Japanese Navy and Air Force, and President Roosevelt has declared war. And everybody just left, the fellow that was talking must have been military because he said everyone is ordered to go back to your units, so all military, so we went back out. Took the bus back out to Camp Bowie.

Did you have any idea that that attack was going to take place in your mind?

Robert Bearden: Oh no, no. That was just, no absolutely nothing. I didn't know anything about that. I knew a little about Hitler, but not that much. I just knew that he was bad news and that obviously somebody was going to have to deal with him and the German Army, and I had a little tiger blood then and I was perfectly ready. I found out later that I wasn't as ready as I thought I was once I got shot at, but at that time I said let's sick 'em, let's go.

OK, so this was Dec. 7, 1941, and I assume when you heard the words that it was war that you were not necessarily afraid or scared?

Robert Bearden: No, I was not.

Was it more correct to say you were more anxious to get to be a part of it?

Robert Bearden: Absolutely. I felt like I probably was raised as a patriot. I loved my country. And I didn't love it as much then as I do now, but I was ready, and I thought I was as ready as I would ever be, and of course I learned a lot more before I got to combat.

So Pearl Harbor occurs, you are then very soon thereafter put aboard trains and shipped out to the West Coast.

Robert Bearden: Yes, we went to Fort Lewis, Washington.

And what was your assignment there?

Robert Bearden: Our assignment there was just to be sure that we got all our personal equipment together, and we had to start living like people living in the north because everything was frozen up there, snow and ice and so forth.

Was this your first experience with snow and ice?

Robert Bearden: Oh yeah, absolutely. I'd seen a little bit in Texas as a kid, but you know how weather is in Texas. You get snow today and it's gone two days later. That's the only experience I ever had, but this was 24/7 up there, and immediately we started going to the West Coast, I'm talking about the beach from Washington through Oregon and California, down to California, we started working our way down the coast, digging in placements at any site that looked like it might be an invasion site, because the word was that the Japanese were coming. It wasn't a question of if, it was a question of when. Everybody thought that. They were loading up Japanese down in California and taking them off to essentially concentration camps, just putting them in, confining them behind barbed wire, and later on I went as part of that doing myself, loading farmers up in trucks and shipping 'em out.

So you were involved in the internment process?

Robert Bearden: Oh yeah, at the very first I got to California, I was involved in that and it wasn't long. I probably worked maybe a week doing that, enough to see what was happening for sure.

How did you feel about what was going on?

Robert Bearden: Well, I thought it was absolutely essential because I couldn't imagine having these people that, I think probably the atrocity of jumping on Pearl Harbor without any, anybody suggesting that that was going to happen, without any declaration of war and they just come in there and took our facilities and our people apart. I was very skeptical of every Japanese person I saw. I thought it was personally reasonable to get 'em out of there.

Do you feel that way today?

Robert Bearden: No, no probably not today, but knowing what I knew then, yeah.

And in addition to placements and internment duty, what other types of things were you doing?

Robert Bearden: Well, we were stringing barbed wire all up and down the coast, up on the hills above the Pacific shoreline, and at every site that looked like it might be an invasion site, we dug mortar emplacements, machine gun emplacements, and in many cases fired them so if we had to go jump in there, we would already have our prerecorded firing instructions. And so we did that.

Did you in your mind think of possible invasion?

Robert Bearden: Absolutely, I thought it was coming.

You did, you really did.

Robert Bearden: Yeah, and it was a little spooky because we'd be guarding things like Columbia River Bridge, the only bridge within 50 miles of where the military could use for crossing the Columbia River, and being on a guard post there in the middle of the night and we'd never been around water, we'd never heard these fog horns down on the river, and it was as spooky as it could be. So it was not uncommon for a guy up on top of this bridge to hear something underneath the bridge, and holler who's there? Who's there? And the guy down on the bottom hears the guy up on top and says who's there? Who's there? Practically over there shooting at each other. These are two guys that are guys out of the same jeep, about 30 minutes before. Just really spooked. So it was not a place to go. I remember one time my company commander said how about going and checking the guard out? I said sir, I'm not checking that guard. Those people are crazy out there with those weapons. They have real quick trigger fingers, and that's a good way to get shot. Don't worry, they're out there. I saw 'em being posted so they're there.

Did you hear of or see any experiences where people actually were shot?

Robert Bearden: No, only heard rumors. And the rumors were all it took to motivate us.

OK, so you were preparing for the invasion of the West Coast of the United States doing your part in preparing for that, and how long were you involved in that process?

Robert Bearden: Well, from December, it must've taken us 10 days to get out there, so it must've been from December 20th, probably the 1st of January we started working on the coast, and from there, I left the following August to go to paratrooper school.

So really from December through the next Fall, you were doing this type of work on the coast, and I assume that somewhere along the line you decided either that there wasn't going to be an invasion, or the chances of the invasion had substantially diminished and you wanted to do something else.

Robert Bearden: Yes, I decided, number one, I heard that they made $50 a month extra pay, paratroopers, and I could, would have to leave my rank with the unit, but I could get my rank back as soon as I got to finishing school, which is what I did. So I had left there, I left there in August. I had a week in Dallas, I had a week's leave, and all the way to finishing school, I had a week's leave in Dallas. Paratrooper school, that took a month, and when that was over we were assigned to 507 Parachute Infantry, I was, and started the same vigorous, vigorous training with paratroops.

So the actual training period to be in paratrooper school was only a month long?

Robert Bearden: Well yeah, for jump school. It's your wings took a month. There were four stages, A, B, C, and D, and each one of those, in one you might be learning how to pack a parachute; in another you learn how to do a certain kind of landing; and you train in different phases. And the parachute jump itself. At the end of that time you made five jumps. The last

week we had a jump a day for five days, and you get your wings, you get what they call a jump school furlough, and you come back, and when you come back you are assigned to a parachute regiment.

Now prior to the time you went to paratroop school, I assume, had you ever been in an airplane?

Robert Bearden: I'd never been in an airplane in my life. I'd never seen a parachute.

Did it at all concern you that you were going to be jumping out of airplanes?

Robert Bearden: Well, it should have, but because nobody else there had ever been in an airplane either, no one. I don't know anybody and I don't believe I met while I was in paratroops that had ever been in a parachute airplane before they got down there. I jumped out of the first seven airplanes I got in. And I packed the first seven parachutes that I jumped myself.

You packed your own chute?

Robert Bearden: Yeah. That was a confidence thing I'm sure.

I guess. Now do you remember your first jump?

Robert Bearden: Not really. I remember the second one but I don't remember the first one. See we were trained to where stand up and up come, check your equipment, sound off our equipment check, stand in the door and close it up, and that was just like training a war dog. You know, when you say go, go. So we went through those things, we jumped out of 500 airplanes on the ground going through a mock system and going through this whole system so when all of a sudden you're up in an airplane and jump master says stand up and hook up, boy you stand up and you latch onto the anchor line with your snap master, and he says check your equipment, you check your equipment and the guy in front of you, guy in back of you checks your equipment. He said stand off for equipment check and he started 18 OK, 17 OK, until it gets up to number 1, and then he says stand in the door and close it up. That means get up tight to the door, and then go. And it was just like race horses when the bell rings, they go. That's exactly. We were taught that we needed to be out of that airplane half a second per man.

So there wasn't a lot of time to think about whether you were afraid or not.

Robert Bearden: There was a big, bad sergeant waiting at that door if you decided to change your mind. He'd help you out.

How about the flight up, your first flight, your first time you left the ground in an airplane and went up knowing that you were going to jump out of that airplane once you got up?

Robert Bearden: I didn't trust the airplane. I trusted the parachute because I had two parachutes – one on my back and one on my chest, and I packed personally the one on my back, and so I had confidence that it was done right, and so the first jump it was just going through the same things that had gone on on the ground 500 times, no difference except we were up in the air, and the flight was perfect. It was up 1,200 to 1,500 feet, which is pretty high for paratroops to jump, and it didn't take long until the sergeant, jump master was saying stand up and hook up, and I was ready. Now the next day was a whole different thing. Next day when he said stand up

and hook up, I couldn't move. I was frozen right there with fear. I could not get up, but one of my buddies reached down and snatched me up and got me back up on the line and hooked me. He hooked me up, he checked my equipment, he checked the guy in front of me, he sounded off for me, the whole thing, and when I went out the door, you push so hard that you're in the middle of the stick, you're going out the door. I mean there's a guy in the back end of the stick which I did in Normandy for example, was pushing that stick, just leaning against it as hard as you can so you can get out as quick as you can. And Billy Blansit, who by the way was killed in the plane he jumped across the Rhine River into Germany, and Billy got me out of the airplane that day, and oddly enough on our third jump, I did the same thing for him. He couldn't get up.

He froze the third time?

Robert Bearden: Absolutely froze and just sitting there with a blank stare on his face.

Was this a usual happening?

Robert Bearden: Oh, it's not uncommon at all. I think it's just being overcome with fear, and it happens from time to time, and -

But the first time it doesn't.

Robert Bearden: No, not necessarily the first time. I think it's less often the first time than maybe it is the second and third because you basically get to where you know what's coming I guess, and oddest thing is it's a fear of the parachute. Is it going to open? As a matter of fact I made 25 jumps and I never liked one of them. I made 25 jumps. Normandy was my 25th jump. It's almost twice as many as most guys had because I went to jump school, I went to jump master training and some special jumps, opened the rodeo one time, and did some different jumps that the other guys didn't make, so I went over 25 jumps, and I hated every one of them.

You hated them.

Robert Bearden: Hated every one of them.

Why did you hate them?

Robert Bearden: I didn't think the sucker was going to open.

So that was the concern.

Robert Bearden: I'll tell you, it would've taken more guts to go down and pack my bags than it would go to my death. I'd rather go to my death than go down and my guys standing around me watching me pack my bag.

So you did it no matter how you felt.

Robert Bearden: And I think that most of the guys were about that way.

How long did it take you from the time that you exited the plane before your chute opened?

Robert Bearden: Well, it starts opening when you are 15 feet out of the plane. The tank cover, you're hooked up to a line in the cable in the airplane, and as you go out, this line unravels on the back of your backpack, your pressure on your back, and then what you call your static line that's hooked up to the plane, you follow that link and that jerks the pack cover off, and then you follow the link of the suspension lines and the canopy, so then finally when you get the static line, the suspension lines, which are gosh something like 15 feet long I believe, and the canopy, you're strung, that whole thing is strung out and it starts gathering air supposedly from the prop. I never did quite understand that. But it opens, but you get a tremendous jerk when that pack cover comes off and it just almost takes the nails out of your boots it's such a jerk, and that was most cases. Most jumps were like that. And of course you didn't mind it because you knew it was open. I'd say that your parachute was open within 60 seconds if it was a good opening. Now I had one in Sedalia, Missouri, where I fell from 800 feet to probably 250 feet, and that felt like it took all day.

And why did it take so long?

Robert Bearden: Well because I messed with it. The parachute, the apex of the canopy, the very top of it is tied to what stays, the part that stays with the airplane. The pack cover stays with the airplane and your static line, and there's about six times of cord, just regular wrapping cord that holds the top of the parachute essentially to the airplane, so when the pack cover comes off and you reach the end of all that, that cord breaks. Well, a friend of mine decided we'd cut that break cord, and I did, and it was crazy. I just had a free fall while that ___ took the parachute never was allowed to open ordinarily, so it was opening on about 400-foot fall, 500, something like that.

So why were you doing that?

Robert Bearden: To see what would happen. Incidentally I never did it twice.

That was the first and last time?

Robert Bearden: I'll guarantee you that.

You didn't like the free fall?

Robert Bearden: I did, well I tell you, I was in Sedalia, Missouri, and I was falling through the air, and I could look down and see the meat wagons, the Red Cross van running around wondering where this fool is gonna land, and they were running around in the drop zone there, and there was a school bus coming into the main gate where I was coming down, and I got to where I could almost read the identification of the independent school district on the side of that bus, so I knew I was in serious trouble, and I finally pulled my reserve and just up on my reserve my main pack opened. So now I got two parachutes in my hand and I have a tommy gun, butt plate of a tommy gun impression under my chin, and every time I shave I get a look at the scar that's there that represents that jump in Sedalia, Missouri.

Is that right, and that was from the impact?

Robert Bearden: Well yeah, well I squatted when I landed. I went down in a squat, my muzzle of my tommy gun dug into that caliche dirt, and as I squatted or I finally reached the bottom of

the squat, my chin was on that butt plate of that tommy gun which is solid steel and it almost took my head off. Man, that was a good job. I was alive.

How about coming down in a chute?

Robert Bearden: Initially it was just oh my gosh, look out there, look at all that, you know, and then, they taught you in jump school about how to make a parachute turn – you turn your body around while you're hanging from your parachute coming down – and then another one which was called a body turn. Well a body turn, all you do is reach around behind your neck and grab each of those parts of your harness and pull across. It just turns your body around and the whole parachute turns. You climb up to the skirt of the canopy and you hold it in your hand. That dumps all the air out of that side of the parachute and the whole parachute makes a big turn. Now when you dump all of the air out of one side, the other side goes flop, flop, flop, big time, so when that happens you turn loose and decide that you forgot that you were interested in making a parachute turn after all. That's the only one time I ever tried that, and I never saw anybody else ever try to.

Did you enjoy the sensation of floating down?

Robert Bearden: Yeah, I think I did. After it was open, yes I think I did. It was just kind of, you get the whole bird's eye view up there, and then about 100 feet off the ground you start remembering, oo-oo, I got to land this thing. But the ride down is fantastic and you are able to talk to guys next to you.

I never realized that. I guess you could.

Robert Bearden: Oh yeah. The first time that my parachute opened on my second jump and I didn't think I was going to jump, I screamed, I said Billy, Billy, the so and so opened, only it wasn't so and so… It opened.

OK, you went through parachute training, you became a paratrooper, you got your wings, and then went to a unit.

Robert Bearden: Yes, went to 507 Parachute Infantry, and which was immediately moved across from Fort Benning in Georgia, proper to where the jump school is. We were what they called a frying pan which was barracks for students. We got our wings. We came back from jump school furlough, were assigned to 507, we moved across the Chattahoochee River to the Alabama side of Fort Benning, Georgia, and there it was just night and day, night and day, training, training, training on our weapons, on marches, on runs. Every morning before breakfast we ran 5 miles. The most rigorous physical training you can imagine until we were just darned near bulletproof. We were so strong physically, and incidentally I think that's the only way I stayed alive during prisoner of war days.

So I assume in your mind you believed that the military properly trained you for the job that you had to do.

Robert Bearden: Absolutely. We could not have been more prepared except when we were in a British air base in England and were being briefed for the D-Day jump. A whole different thing, the information we were getting back was not good information at all. For example, I'd

just been recently shocked to recall that I never heard the word hedgerow, never heard the word hedgerow until I was in one, and boy should we ever have known that.

So the intelligence was lacking.

Robert Bearden: Very lacking and incidentally they were flying missions over there every day. Fighter planes were flying across the Normandy peninsula and bringing photographs back.

Well let's back up a little bit to the training at Fort Benning. After you got your wings, you had a time of intensive training, and how long did that take place?

Robert Bearden: At Benning, probably, well let's see, we left there I think probably I got my wings in August 1942, and we went by train to Shreveport, Louisiana, to that air base, and we did a maneuver jump there. I'd been there to two maneuvers, 1940, 1941, and now I'm back there in 1942 as a paratrooper. First two times I'd gone as a member of the 36th Division. Now I'm going as a member of the 507 Parachute Infantry. I got captured on the first maneuver. I got captured on the second maneuver, and I got captured when I jumped in there on the third maneuver.

Not a bit of luck there in Louisiana.

Robert Bearden: I wound up being the best trained prisoner of war the Germans ever had.

You had practice beforehand. OK, so how long did you then stay in the States?

Robert Bearden: We went to Nebraska, Elias, Nebraska, and there we made several jumps around that part of the United States including one jump up in the Black Hills, and that was not a combat training jump. We had, it was supposed to be R&R, rest and rehabilitation where we took balls, naps, and stuff like that and just played for a while. Then I left there and flew to Italy, Missouri, and we made a jump at Elias, Nebraska. That's where I had my big flap where I messed up my parachute. And so from Elias, we left Elias, Nebraska, on I think December the 10th maybe, and we shipped out of let's see, 10 days, I was on the seas until the 23rd, and the day after we landed in North Ireland, was Christmas. So I remember that distinctly. So the 25th of December, 1943, I was in Europe.

OK, December of 1943. All right, and how did you go over?

Robert Bearden: Let's see, that's not December 1943, that was December 1944. No, 1943. I was in prison 1944.

Because D-Day was '44.

Robert Bearden: Yeah, we stayed there in Ireland about, I guess about three or four months. Then we went back across the channel between Ireland and England, and we went to Nottingham, England. And in Nottingham, well wasn't much training we could do because what they called the bomber command was the U.S. Air Force, British Air Force, Canadian Air Force, they were flying all the time. So we had, we could not fly. As a matter of fact I think we made one, maybe two jumps over there, practice jumps. All we did was just train on our equipment and fire weapons and things like that.

So you basically stayed in England until D-Day. Is that the case?

Robert Bearden: Yes, that's true. We stayed there and we loaded up on, let's see, we loaded about 10:30 or something like that, maybe midnight, and we loaded up at this air base. Now this is the whole 82nd Airborne Division, plus the 101st Airborne Division, plus the Canadian Airborne Division, plus the British Airborne. That's what they called the first Allied Airborne Army, and I have no idea how many men, troops there was, but that's lots of paratroops. But we loaded up. I think we pulled out of there about midnight.

This is June 5th, 1944?

Robert Bearden: June 6th. Let's see, we flew out of there at midnight, June the 5th, and we landed about 2:30 in the morning, June the 6th.

Yes, so did you know where you were going when you loaded up?

Robert Bearden: I thought I knew. Our drop zone was well identified. We knew exactly where our drop zone was. Oddly enough, they would not tell us what towns we were going to be jumping near. They would say S-town on the map, or the sand table. It had a little toothpick in there saying S-town. That was St. Lo.

And why was that?

Robert Bearden: C-town was Shelbourne, and a little town I fought in was close by, but it wasn't even identified, but Ste. Mere Eglise was of course a major target, and it was identified as S-town. So yes, we knew exactly, but nobody hit their drops on. I never met anybody in my life that hit their drops on.

But before we get to that, you had about six months in England.

Robert Bearden: I think so.

And I assume that was in preparation for Operations, and tell me about that experience for that six months. What were you doing?

Robert Bearden: All we did because we couldn't get in the air, all we did was march, fire our guns. We'd go to a range and fire our weapons, which was not that often. But mostly we just stayed right in the company area. We didn't, you know, we'd go to town and go at night and have big parties, as individuals and as groups, and then we had what we called our baptism of fire party there at Nottingham Castle, and the object was just celebrate, we're getting ready to go to combat. But there were so many troops over there that you could not be maneuvering like you could in the States. The sky was full of bombers all day and all night. So for us to slip in a jump – sometimes we would go to an air base anticipating jumping two days later, and we'd be there ten days later just hanging out doing nothing, waiting and sleeping on cots in a hangar, waiting for the bomber command to come down because the British flew all night and the GI's flew all day. And so those big things up there, I tell you, you didn't want to be in the sky when bomber command was up – hazardous.

I think it was even for the bombers.

Robert Bearden: Oh yes, yes. My college roommate was a bomber pilot, and I talked to him a thousand times about how did you keep from running into each other? And they didn't always, they did have those crashes.

What did you think of England and the people of England at that time?

Robert Bearden: I thought they had a lot of guts. I knew what they'd been through with putting up with the air raids from Germany. I knew they had put up with a lot of, I mean civilians had put up with a lot of casualties. I also was coming to know more about the British Army fighting in Africa and Sicily and Italy. They had their part of that combat, too. And of course I recognize that they had the Australians and Canadians with them. Those were great soldiers, those Australians and Canadians, but the British soldiers were, too. The people of England, you just had to hand it to 'em. If you'd go around and see these empty buildings that had been bombed out, big, fine, old, old structures had been built 500 years ago, and they were in a shambles or they had been burned out from these bombs and things, and for those people to sleep underground practically every night with their children, man, you couldn't have anything but respect for them. And so that kind of increased my hostility towards the Germans, and incidentally I am German. My mother was the first one of my family on her line that was born in the States. But I didn't have any trouble going after 'em, none whatsoever. As a matter of fact when I was captured, they would question me and say why you being a German, what are you doing over here? I said man, I was minding my business at Adamson High School when you clowns got this thing going, so I'm tough.

Were you ever caught up in an air raid or anything while you were there?

Robert Bearden: Oh yeah. In town, those rockets that the Germans were firing -

The V-1?

Robert Bearden: Yeah. They didn't know where it was gonna hit. They were just gonna hit in England some place, and they were pretty accurate. They were accurate enough to get into those big cities, but I was in a couple of those, but nobody else was running, so I didn't run either.

So you adjusted to the boom and the explosions and went about your way.

Robert Bearden: Yeah, I think I only did that once, maybe twice, but I would be in a theater or a dance hall, that's where I usually was.

So at this time you'd been in the Army for some period of time, and you'd become a paratrooper, you'd left the United States, you've gotten into England and you have to be knowing that soon I won't call it your easy life, but your safe life isn't going to last much longer.

Robert Bearden: Yeah.

I assume the very fact that the huge numbers of military personnel running around England gave you an idea that something big was going to happen.

Robert Bearden: Yes, there's no question. We were getting our equipment in such shape as you would want it for combat. We were not dealing with our equipment like we were going to have a maneuver jump. It became obvious. As a matter of fact, I had a young girl there locally

by where we were stationed outside of Nyhem, and she'd get the brand iron ___ and I just met her down the road there, and we were getting ready to go on this jump. We'd made two practice jumps on the Grantham Canal just up the road from us, and we were loading up and I was loading in the bus to go to the British air base where we were getting ready for Normandy, and someone said where's Sergeant Bearden, and I said "here." He said there's a girl down there wants to talk to you. So I went down there and I said what are you doing here? She said I just came to say goodbye. I said well, just another maneuver jump. She said no, Bob, you're going to France. I knew then, I said I don't know where you got that information but it's a lie and don't you spread that lie. But she found out somewhere.

She knew.

Robert Bearden: Yeah, and we knew, oh yeah, because this was the first time I ever loaded 8C ammunition, 60 mortar, only time I ever loaded yellow painted 60mm mortar ammunition which meant that it was the real thing.

Live, yes. And so all this time of just training and being about and all of a sudden you were faced with the fact that you were going to France. And so you knew it before you took off that that's where you were going.

Robert Bearden: Oh yeah, we knew where we were going, and we knew everything. We were going through a procedure we'd gone through so many times. Well I'd gone through it 25 times, I'd jumped out of an airplane 25 times, and I was the last man. I was pushing the stick. The stick is 18, 19 men in, in the line in the plane, and I was the last man in the plane, and my job was to push 'em out.

And the only difference between your previous 24 jumps and this one was you didn't think anyone was going to be shooting at you on the first 24.

Robert Bearden: I had no idea what to anticipate. We were told that we would not fly over any anti-aircraft. There wouldn't be any anti-aircraft in our path, and that the weather would be good. So we had nothing but just another good, simple night jump, only it happened to be in France.

And so you were anticipating at least until you hit the ground that it wasn't going to be bad.

Robert Bearden: Yes, and that was the biggest mistake. That was a huge mistake because when we hit land, the whole land opened up and you ever happen to see the Boston Pops on the 4th of July when they play that -

Yes, 1812 Overture?

Robert Bearden: Yeah, and all that stuff is going off in the air?

Yes.

Robert Bearden: All the fireworks? That's exactly what D-Day looked like, just exactly. It's just literally a dark airplane, you could see in the dark airplane by the flashes of anti-aircraft stuff going off outside of the airplane. That was different.

So you really didn't go in undetected.

Robert Bearden: Oh, goodness no. As a matter of fact, we were the last regiment to go in, and so by the time we got there, I think we may have been an hour behind the first paratroops that jumped, so by that time the whole German Army, anti-aircraft and all, is aware that we are coming and it was like a shooting gallery. They were ready.

Inside the plane you couldn't observe anything.

Robert Bearden: Well yeah, looking out the windows you could see the stuff bursting all over, but by that time, we had no more cleared the land, and hit the French soil in the air, than we were given the command stand up and hook up. So we were standing up then, and I was talking to the pilot of my plane in his little tight compartment, in a C4-7, very snug, and I was last man, so I stepped inside of that door and I was talking to him, found out that he was from Fort Worth where I had spent time as a kid. And I'm talking there and something is going on in my head that is saying as long as you're talking, you ain't jumping. And so we kept talking and talking. This is my 25th jump, so I know what it sounds like with a stick going out the door. I know exactly what it sounds like. I heard that and I said what's that? He said they're gone. I had not checked equipment, I had not checked the man in front of me, I had not hooked up, I had not done anything, I had not followed any procedures, so I just ran out of the little compartment there, hooked onto the anchor line with my staff master and started shoving and shouting, go, go, go, shoving the stick out, and my stick bounced back. I'd never seen it before, but I knew somebody was hung in the door. I went down on the outside of the stick and around there, and sure enough the airplane is pitching all over the sky from all this anti-aircraft stuff, and it's lighting up like everything, so I could plainly see a helmet right on the door, right flush with the door on the aluminum floor. I could also tell there was obviously a head in that helmet, and the body, arms and legs and everything else, is outside, flapping around against the outside of the airplane. There's a prop on that side, the left side of the airplane, there's a prop not 10-15 feet from him, plus all that anti-aircraft stuff busting around, he is like a rag doll bouncing against the outside of that airplane, and it was very obvious he had fallen going out the airplane feet first, both feet, slipped and went out that way. His rifle was across the door and his chin was hung on his rifle, so that's the reason his helmet was flush with the deck of the airplane, and his whole body was outside flapping around against the outside as the airplane pitched around all that anti-aircraft stuff. And I reached down, it was very obvious to me what you had to do, grab his muzzle, the butt, grabbed the muzzle and jerked it up, and he just chu-u-u, he was gone, so I backed off and started screaming go, go, go! And the stick started back again and I went and got back around behind and started pushing. When I went out I'm guessing after 25 jumps that I've experienced, I guess I went out at 250 feet maybe, something like that.

That's pretty low.

Robert Bearden: So I was not in the air a matter of seconds until my feet hit the ground. Now it was quiet, all that junk up there in the sky was all gone, peaceful, quiet, except off in the distance you could hear some smaller fire, rifles and machine guns.

Did you see any of the planes that brought you over being shot down?

Robert Bearden: No, I did not. As a matter of fact I never looked up I guess. No, I didn't. I started heading towards, I didn't have any idea where we were. I knew this, that the jump was messed up, I just knew we messed up, and so I started -

What do you mean by messed up?

Robert Bearden: Well, there wasn't anyone else around me. We were supposed to land together. That's the object of, my squad, we were supposed to land together. I had my equipment bundle right in the middle of my stick. I had six bundles and those six bundles were supposed to be released right in the middle from the first man to me, so that we were all supposed to slip towards those. We all slipped towards them and we all land right near them, so my squad is all together with our six equipment bundles. Haha, what a joke. I don't know where those equipment bundles went. Most of them I think landed, you know, the Germans had flooded what we had considered our drop zone.

And I assume you did not know that.

Robert Bearden: Well yes, and as a matter of fact, the most casualties we had on the jump were those who drowned in that lake, or actually it was a swamp. We referred to it as a swamp. It was the M____i River had been, the flooding had flooded the M____i River - the river was just solid, about maybe a quarter of a mile wide and maybe a mile or two long. It was all flooded and hundreds of guys landed in that and drowned. You couldn't possibly make it out. If you landed in there with 125 lbs. of equipment, you're gonna drown.

And you were lucky enough not to.

Robert Bearden: Yup, I did not land in there, I landed well I don't know, a half mile from there. I probably landed a quarter of a mile from there, maybe a half a mile, and I just started heading towards, of course it was pitch dark, and the planes were all gone. I don't know how they got out of there. They were flying from, you see we flew around on the back side of the Shelbourne peninsula, and the planes came, and we came from the opposite sides of the beach landings, and so our planes were flying towards the beach, so they let us out, and they just headed on in, they just kept flying and headed out across the British Channel. They were flying back to England. And immediately landed, they started loading up with re-supplies to bring them back to us, and to also pick up gliders. They started bringing gliders in. But the whole thing was just absolutely mass confuse on. So what we did -

Did you find any of your squad members?

Robert Bearden: No, not then. Later on I did. And the first guy I saw came up to me, here we had this password and counter side, I was supposed to say thunder, and he was supposed to say welcome, or I'd clicked my clicker, we had the little clickers, and I had that hidden in the bottom of my jump suit because I figured that if a GI could hear that clicker, so could a German, so I put that away. But this guy came upon me and we identified one another, and he was a private and he saw I was a sergeant so he thought I knew something I guess, and so he followed me and we headed towards what we thought was that fire, because we knew we were GI's, and I hoped that there wasn't GI's shooting against GI's, which I had heard about before. But we headed in that direction and pretty soon I ran into my company commander, which was Justin Blancey, and so we joined him and we started picking up more, and he had about 50 men I guess, and we headed out across that swamp and he just decided he was gonna go across that swamp. He apparently knew where it was and we were gonna go across that swamp and take over a village called Fresville, F-R-E-S-V-I-L-L-E, and we went across, and we took that village about 9 o'clock in the morning and -

OK, you found your company commander -

Robert Bearden: I found my company commander and I'm following him, I don't care where he's going, whether it's not in keeping with our plan, he's my company commander and I'm following him. So we went across and I got to use my 60mm mortar training experience by firing two 60mm mortars into Fresville, and the purpose was to make the Germans get in their foxholes and off of any gun emplacements that they have until our troops could go in, walk in up the road into town. So they went in in two columns into Fresville, and what I did worked perfectly. It was just exactly what I'd been trained to do.

So you were able to find your equipment enough -

Robert Bearden: Yes, we found the equipment bundles which were not necessarily ours, but ours, we were identifying some bundles by the color of the parachute, and a red parachute would be one, maybe a third caliber ammunition; green parachute would be 60 mortar ammunition, something like that, and I don't remember what those were, but yes we found ammunition and probably had I don't know, I guess we probably had 60 rounds or 80 rounds of 60 mortar ammunition when we went into Fresville, and we didn't use, probably used maybe 30 rounds and I used the rest of it on a German .88 artillery emplacement.

So you had an opportunity to fire your weapon.

Robert Bearden: Yes, I could not have been more excited. It was like a high school kid receiving the first kick-off of his life. I just was so hyped I could hardly stand it because I knew what I was doing, I knew my business, but I had never proved it. Well I did that day, and there's some Krauts that are still talking about it, I'll tell you. There's a bald German retired soldier that can tell you about a young artillery barrage when it was just one 60mm mortar. We could put nine rounds in the air before the first one hit.

Is that right?

Robert Bearden: Yes. And so when they started landing, believe me, it's awesome, and those things break up into fragments of steel.

And if I'm not mistaken, with the mortar you can't hear them coming.

Robert Bearden: Oh Lord, no, you don't hear them coming. You hear, it goes K-wham, so you just hear that first initial detonation and no, it's too late then. But when we took Fresville what was an interesting thing, my company commander, my job was done, as a mortar man my job was done and so I just was looking around for something I could take down one of those German buildings, and my company commander said go get a detail and clean out the German barracks. Well there was one house in this community, a big stone house that was known as the German barracks, and the Germans had just occupied it. So I got one of my men from Wekom, Alabama, Fred Kelly, and we went down there, walked into this huge, through these huge gates into this courtyard, and got inside there and I heard something upstairs, and I threw a firing grenade through one of the windows and it blew out the windows. I told Fred, I said well there's nothing up there gonna bother us, let's go downstairs. We went downstairs and we had a little shoot-out and the Krauts were taking off out of the back of the building. We were shooting at 'em. I don't know whether we hit any of them or not, but they were high tailing it out of Dodge and so I went

back and told the company commander, I said it's done. There's nobody there. It's cleaned out. 50 years later, on the 50th anniversary of D-Day, my son and I found that house, walked into the courtyard. I had the jump suit on just like the one we had when we were down on D-Day, a typical paratrooper jump suit only it was obviously not the one that I wore then, but it's an identical jump suit, and as I walked in there, there were two well-dressed people, obviously one of them must have owned this place, he and the two people walked over towards me and when he looked and saw this jump suit, he said you were here. I said yes sir, I was here. And the president was getting ready to speak that afternoon at the 50th anniversary, so all these Norman people were in their best, their best dressed clothes, and he says come, and he led me over towards the building and he says the story goes that on D-Day, two paratroopers came into this courtyard and threw a grenade right through that window, and he pointed to the window where I had thrown that grenade. You think that didn't freak me out. My son had tears in his eyes. I'd told him these stories though long before.

So 50 years later -

Robert Bearden: Yeah, this man tells me the story goes that on D-Day, two paratroopers came into this courtyard and he described exactly what happened.

Wow.

Robert Bearden: I could hardly talk. He took us upstairs by the way, and showed us slick floors, floors had been walked on for 200, 300 years, wood floors, and a huge maroon patch in the floor that was where some Germans had died, the blood. They'd never been able to clean it off. And incidentally on a concrete beam on the far side of that room were some chunks knocked out and they had left those chunks knocked out for 50 years. We go back there as often as we can. I've been back four times and we are welcome guests there, anybody in my family can go there and stay as long as they want to. The people that own this live in Paris and they come out on weekends and on holidays. But they love, they love anybody that's been a paratrooper, they love over there in Normandy.

Your unit with your company commander captures this small town.

Robert Bearden: We stayed until noon, and about noon, the Germans showed up with a tank. The only thing a paratrooper could do with a tank was run from it. We had no weapons, no weapons whatsoever with which we could combat a tank. Only Murphy's could do that sort of thing. So headed back across the swamp. After we got across the swamp, we were sort of licking their, sitting there licking our wounds, emotionally I guess, and my regimental commander who was several miles away, made contact with my company commander and said bring your troops out here. Well he was, he was in a trap. He was surrounded and really needed help, of course, and so we went over there and all during the night, we traveled all night to get there, and when we got there the next morning, I got into a situation where I was strapped with a tommy gun, I ended up carrying a tommy gun ordinarily, but on that, at that time, I didn't have my rifle. I wanted a rifle, always wanted a rifle, so I didn't want to be shooting at somebody close. I wanted to be shooting at them 500 yards or so away. And so I had a tommy gun that a lieutenant had, he had all he could take, and somebody up front was hollering, was sending the word back, send a tommy gun up, send a tommy gun up. We were in a long column, and this lieutenant had a tommy gun, and he just broke down and so I went over and got the tommy gun from him, went up front. This guy told me what I should do, shoot, there were two Germans in the roadway there, and throw a grenade at them and follow it over and go down into the roadway

and up into the next pasture across the roadway, and I did that while I was in air going over there to about six or eight feet below to the sandy road, he, this guy hollered "look out below," and there were some Germans right below that had been awakened by that grenade going off about 100 feet to their left, and as I hit the bank on the other side, I looked back and here these two guys are, or three Germans are looking right at me trying to get their rifles up to a port position to get a shot at me, and fortunately enough, I got a round in each one of 'em I guess and they all went down. And I changed magazines or clips, whatever you call 'em, I changed it and raked 'em again and went up over into the next field and just shooting everything that showed up, threw a grenade, I think I threw that grenade 100 yards, I don't know. It was awesome. I was so scared. And finally the, what we were doing, we were breaking through, I was breaking through the line of troops that had my Colonel Millet surrounded. I had no idea that's what we were doing, but that's what was happening, I could later tell. And so they, the Germans finally just backed off and let us go on through and then came back together. Now we, Captain Taylor's group, are in the same shape that Colonel Millet is. We were all in there together.

So it was just a bigger surrounded group.

Robert Bearden: Big, big shootout, man, a big shootout, well as a matter of fact, Colonel Millet told others that he was gonna give me a distinguished service cross for that shootout and I never did get it, but a letter from my platoon leader to my mother here in Killeen was telling her that I was a prisoner and that Colonel Millet was gonna get me a distinguished service cross for killing all those Germans, and bless her little heart, she sent me a letter to stalag 3C in prison east of Berlin, telling me Bobby, we're so proud of you and Colonel Millet's gonna get you a distinguished service cross for killing all those Germans. Well fortunately a censor in New York caught that – sent it back to her and said Mrs. Bearden, I don't think Sergeant Bearden would want the camp commandant of stalag 3C to hand him this letter about him killing all those Germans, so we had that letter for a long time. I don't know what happened to that, but the letter that my platoon leader wrote to my mother about me receiving, that Colonel Millet was going to give me a DSC – that's in the book, by the way.

We'll get to the book. OK, so tell me, you now know that you have probably killed some people. Do you recall your feelings at that time as to what was going on in your mind?

Robert Bearden: I had played a little football and I remember making tackles, where the guy kind of bounced and you know, obviously wasn't comfortable for him, and I had been a boxer and I'd knocked people around in the boxing ring, and it never bothered me. Well this was just another, to me it was just like another really high stakes game, and you better, you better play it right and you better play it tough, and you better not sit around wondering about oh goodness, am I gonna shoot somebody, because you'll be the one that the little cross is going up on. So it didn't never bother me, never bothered me one ounce.

Not at all.

Robert Bearden: No. And incidentally, the first time I shot a sparrow with a BB gun, I took it home and begged my mother to try to save its life. I've been a very gentle person all my life.

Not in that situation.

Robert Bearden: Yup. I knew this, that those folks were on the ground shooting at that airplane when we first crossed that land, that was my first exposure, and I knew that those things

were going off there weren't play things, weren't toys. That was real stuff that was trying to bring this airplane down, and so -

Did you while you were there in that action see any paratroopers that were killed?

Robert Bearden: Oh yeah, oh yeah. My platoon sergeant who was probably my best friend named Chet Gunka during a fire fight there in Fresville, somebody came by and said Chet got it, and that's all they said, just Chet got it, and I knew what they meant. Chet got killed. And I never did process that. I didn't process that for years. I never processed the fact that I had lost my best friend, and I was back in the civilian before I ever processed that and it was a very, very painful experience, but the thing about it is, usually a bomber pilot for example drops bombs - my roommate, Chuck Carroll from Dallas, dropped bombs all over France and southern Europe and oil fields and so forth, and he never saw where those bombs land. He never saw one of those bombs take a building apart and blow people apart, whatever. Well I tell you, I was, I couldn't have been from those first three Germans that I shot, I couldn't have been 50 feet from 'em. I'm looking 'em right in the eye and shot all three of 'em dead. It never bothered me at all. As a matter I'll tell you all it did was just, I was just screaming to get this guy to come over. He was going to, after I got down there he was going to come over and follow me with, bring the troops over. And so I just went across and up the other side and started screaming in all sorts of vulgar language, get your butts over here, you know. I got a war going on over here. And I'd shoot everything that moved, I'd shoot everything that moved. Down to my left about maybe 40 or 50 yards, there was a house, there was hedges right next to the house, and I could hear a machine gun being put in behind that hedge. I threw a grenade, a fire grenade, bounced on top of the house, rolled off of the house and went off just as it hit right where those Kraut machine gun team was. The gun never did fire. So you know, I never did have, and one night there when we were with our colonel, three of us threw phosphorous grenades. Now that's the worst thing you can possibly do, you know, surprise somebody with a phosphorous grenade. You know what phosphorous is? You know what that looks like?

Yes.

Robert Bearden: Well it's, ain't nothing worse than that and I think they used to drop bombs to burn towns down that was phosphorous I guess.

Yes.

Robert Bearden: Anyway three of us threw phosphorous grenades at a machine gun team and all three of those things went off, those guys screamed so loud that you could hear them, you know, a mile away.

Because the phosphorous burns right through the skin, goes right into you.

Robert Bearden: Yeah, and I don't guess there's anything, I guess if you jumped in water it would make it worse.

Right.

Robert Bearden: But anyway it was, this was out in a field and that never, you know, I understood that those guys were there to try to turn their machine gun on me and kill me and my buddies and that was just the rule of the game.

How many Germans do you think that you might've killed in that action?

Robert Bearden: I think, I think that I left 20 out of 30 in that pasture dead.

And that was all your own work.

Robert Bearden: There was nobody else there but me.

Were you just, were you brave, or just scared, or just trained?

Robert Bearden: Oh scared, scared out of my head. No bravery whatsoever. I was in super physical condition, super, super. I could run as far as you want to run. I could carry as much weight as you wanted me to carry. I could do anything physically like that that was put upon me, and I knew all the weapons. I'd fired expert with the tommy gun, I'd fired expert with a .45, with a rifle I fired sharpshooter, so I knew all the weapons, and as I look back on it, I thought if anybody had said OK, let's everybody lay down our arms and go home, I'd have laid mine down in a minute and gone home. You know, I was scared to death. But on the other hand, right in the middle of it, you know, before the whistle blows and calls this off, I'm gonna shoot everything that moves with everything that I have. I fired at one time I got in such bad shape for a weapon that I was using a German rifle firing wooden German bullets in a 30 caliber German rifle.

Is that right?

Robert Bearden: Yes sir. And so you know, it's such a desperate thing out there, so re-supplies coming in, you have to tell me where, where is it, because let me place an order for some. Just didn't happen, but I, when the time we threw those phosphorous grenades and fired that place up, somebody hollered every man for himself. Well don't tell a bunch of scared paratroopers at 2 or 3 o'clock pitch dark in the Normandy hedge rows, every man for himself. When he hears that blood curdling scream, they took off in all directions, including me. I wound up in a hedge, may be out a mile away or something, and just you know, my heart must've been pounding I don't know what, like almost about to come out of my chest, and I had a rifle and I had about three rounds of rifle ammunition left. I hid in the hedge like all these guys were. The Germans brought a big, huge gun into that hedge row heading where I was, and they started clearing these hedge rows of paratroopers. Everybody in this area are paratroopers. Nobody's in this far from the beach. So we're all hiding in these hedges and they're going around and pulling these hedges open because then they're seeing a guy, see where the hedge comes out of the ground is the root system, and right next to that is kind of a dirt that these roots are growing out of and there's kind of a little place kind of that you could sit in and the leaves of the hedge go over you and nobody can see you in there unless they open 'em up. When they open 'em up, of course they can just see you sitting there. So that's what they were doing. They were going around opening these hedges up on all four of these and I could peer out and see what they were doing and see 'em open 'em up and see a guy then shoot 'em, and hear 'em holler once in a while, and so I knew I had 10 minutes to live, and man I was not ready. And so I prayed like crazy, oh God, you know, save me, and just about that time, an airplane started flying over, a single engine observation plane started flying over, and I knew enough about artillery to know that they were looking for things like that big gun right there. They were sitting there, a huge, huge German artillery plate. I also knew, I also knew from our planning and our instructions before the invasion that Miss Texas was going to be sitting right offshore, Miss New Jersey is going to be sitting out there, and both of them are packing 14-inch guns which can blow a

building down, and all of a sudden I knew that's what was gonna happen, and that little airplane flew off and about that time one of those boxcar style rounds went over and hit beyond me, and then the next one hit towards the gun, the ships from me. I knew the next one was going to be right in the middle of that gun and I was too close, so I just hauled and took off and I ran until I ran into my Colonel Millet and -

Who was the commander of the 501st.

Robert Bearden: Yeah, he was Commanding Officer of 507 Parachute Infantry, and had been from the beginning. That's where it was organized over in Fort Benning, and he took us, well he was instructed to come from where we were at his position, he was instructed to bring all of his troops back down to the M___i River where the rest of the 507 was and where General Gavin was who was Assistant Commander of the 82nd Airborne Division. So we started working our way back down that way, and in the process, we were isolated about 3 o'clock in the morning, on I think D plus three or four which would be the 9th or 10th of June, we were isolated in the middle of a pasture with Germans completely surrounded and parachute players hanging over us where they could see every one of us and they were just picking us off with rifles one at a time. They turned the machine gun on us a couple of times, and this guy said, peace surrender, tried to speak German, he said peace surrender, and Colonel Millet heard him and said who said that? Buck sergeant from New York City, Brooklyn, New York, said "I said that." Colonel Millet said we, throw down your rifles, come on out, and I think with that he saved all of our lives. I think we'd have all been dead. And so that's where I surrendered. That's where I became a prisoner of war. Whole new lifestyle.

I'm sorry?

Robert Bearden: A whole new lifestyle.

A whole new lifestyle. So you along with your commander and maybe how many men?

Robert Bearden: About 25 of us in that pasture.

25? You all surrendered to the Germans.

Robert Bearden: Yes. I walked out with a rifle in my hand and like I say, it was lit up. You can't light a room up in broad daylight, sunshine, you can't light anything up more than those flares hanging up there with parachutes. Always had two of 'em or three of 'em hanging there and as one of them would go down, they'd just fire another one up, so they just kept 'em up there and it was like, like we were on stage and they were behind the hedge rows in the dark looking at us like we were, you know, just targets in a shooting gallery, and so it was, we'd have been killed, no question about it, if Millet hadn't surrendered us.

Were you wounded at all?

Robert Bearden: Well I got hit on D-Day with a rifle grenade. I was already with my company commander about, he wanted me to take a detail out and see what was firing out there. I said sir, we've been down there fighting those clowns for those machine guns in those bubbles down there. I know what they've got. It's some Germans that have American machine guns, American ammunition, and they're firing and that's who that is. And he wanted us to take a detail down there, and I explained to him that every time you step through a hedge row, that's

when you find out what's on the other side of that hedge row. That's the best way to lose men. It's just like sudden death. You just walk through enough of 'em, you're not gonna have any men left. So I was arguing with him telling him let's wait until they come to the next hedge row. We'll challenge 'em. If they're GI's, we'll let 'em in. If they're Krauts, we'll get it on. Just that simple. And then that way, nobody gets hurt. And while I was standing there by a hedge, a German rifle grenade detonated on a hedge and hit me right in the head on the left side of my head in my ear, and then the next night I guess it was, we got in a situation where we were walking and an MG-42 machine gun fired from about 30 feet and a guy next to me was maybe I don't know, 8 or 10 feet to my left, we both flew through the air with our arms outstretched, and all of my fingers on both hands, not all, not each finger, but fingers on each hand got hit by tracer bullets and all it did was burn 'em. It didn't go through any finger, didn't knock any fingers off, but took his nose off completely, knocked his nose off, but the Germans were on the other side of the hedge, so they couldn't lower that muzzle to get it down to where we were, and in time, I don't know whether they run out of ammunition or for what reason, but they took off and I bandaged that guy's face up and I never did see him again. But I was told later some guy saw him in the States and they said they started building him a better nose than he had when he got hit. He said sergeant, see if I'm hit anyplace besides my face, and we're both laying down there with the bullets going right over, tracers right over. Every other bullet's a tracer, and we're laying obviously as close to the earth we can get, and I just reached over there and felt and I just got a handful of blood, and I said golly, he ain't got no nose and that's the reason I just reached over there and I got this, I forgot the name of that, Carlisle bandage they called it, had these strings on each end, huge thing, just made him like a mask to go on that, and he got back, went back to the states, got all the surgery he needed and then incidentally I later had his son call me from New Orleans, Louisiana, to get me to tell me about his dad, to tell him.

So after two days of well, after years of training, two days of violent combat, you become a prisoner of war.

Robert Bearden: Yeah.

OK, just for the moment I'm going to turn off the machine.

[Next recording starts below.]

Mr. Bearden, we stopped in our initial interview at the point where you surrendered with the commander of the 507th Parachute Infantry regiment because of a horribly adverse situation for all of you, and tell me what that felt like at that moment, the young soldier who wanted to be in the war got in the paratroopers to do it, got in the Normandy invasion, jumped, and a couple of days later he was captured. Tell me how that felt at that time.

Robert Bearden: Actually there was nothing left in me. There was nothing left in me emotionally, physically. I was in no way, there was just nothing, they had taken everything out of me. Those situations had taken everything out of me. You see we stayed, it was like when you scare a cat and it gets up in the air with his claws exposed and all four legs spread out, well that's kind of the way we stayed for the whole time after we hit the ground, and for example, when we got ready to leave Colonel Millet's position, a lieutenant from my company, Lieutenant Seedmans came to me where I was laying down and said sergeant, go get the outpost in. We're getting ready to pull out. And I said lieutenant, I can't get up. And he said what's wrong with you? I said I don't know. And he said, and he knew me as a good soldier since we had both gone into the 507 at the same time two years ago, and I had a reputation of being just a good

soldier and a good sergeant squad leader, and he said are you afraid? And I said I don't think so. But I was shaking, my body was shaking so bad that I was bouncing off of the ground. I had rolled up in a raincoat and so I don't know what a medical person would tell you the shape I was in, but it was, well obviously my brain wasn't working because Colonel Millet said throw down your rifles and come on out, and I walked out with my rifle, pulling my rifle in my right hand, holding it by the muzzle, and a German came up, a German soldier came up and almost took my head off with his rifle butt. You're not supposed to, if you go to surrender, don't surrender with a weapon in your hand. So anyway, there weren't anything left of me. So it had no impact on me. It was just like you know, shoot me, get it over with. You know, I just, I was, there was nothing left.

You were spent as they say.

Robert Bearden: Yeah, I was absolutely spent, and I've never been that way since, thank God, but that was the worst situation of being absolutely without anything going for me, and so I just stumbled along. We took off marching. I just stumbled along down the road just like a drunk or something.

How many of there, were there in your group, do you recall?

Robert Bearden: About 25.

About 25?

Robert Bearden: That's just I'm guessing that. I didn't, nobody counted them of course, but I'm just guessing there were about 25.

OK. And they started marching you back somewhere.

Robert Bearden: They started, they took us to a little village and put us in a something about what you'd call a henhouse. You know it didn't have, it had some chicken wire on one side, and it had a little chicken wire door that they could lock, but the rest of it was just tin. And then a little bit later they moved us to a, moved us to a little store front, a building that had a little glass showcase, and on a trip back to France, I asked the local people where that was, and they said yes, indeed, there was. It was right here. They showed me where it was, but it was hit by an artillery shell and blown up. So it was not there, but I remember vividly being in that building where my company commander, Captain Taylor was there, and asked me to look at his side where he'd gotten a bullet right straight through his side. It didn't hit any bones or anything, just went through the fleshy part of his side, went in one side and out the other, and of course, I was instantly shocked by the, by the awareness that I had to treat this man, and I'm not a medic. But I thought oh, did I sleep through those emergency relief and first aid classes, and sure enough, I remembered exactly what to do, and then a short time later, they brought in a young lieutenant into this store front location. Two German soldiers marched him down a sandy road and he was, I don't know, he may have been hit 20 times right in the, everything from his face to his stomach to his legs, and it was incredible. He wasn't, he got caught with a burp gun we called it, that just fired so fast. If you got hit with one, you got hit with any number. But anyway, it blew holes where all, anyway when I ripped his clothes off of him, his jumpsuit and everything, and I remembered in his face he was, he was, I thought he was a recreation officer with the regiment. But anyway, I remember the only two things we had were bandages and sulfur powder and morphine syringe. So I was very obviously he had to have a morphine shot immediately because

he was gonna die of shock. So I gave him a shot, and then I went through each one of these little holes. I don't know how many were just all over him. One of them disappeared in the cleft of his chin. I have no idea where it went. But anyway, I went to each one of these holes and with my fingers opened it up a little bit, and tapped some sulfur powder into each hole. And later, somebody visited with him in the hospital, and he had lost the last digit of one of his fingers, of one of his little fingers, and he lived through the whole thing. So if he ever found out what sort of first aid he got, he'd probably died of shock.

Was he conscious at the time that you treated him?

Robert Bearden: I'm sorry.

Was he conscious at the time that you treated him?

Robert Bearden: Yes, yes he was. But in such a state of shock that you couldn't tell he was hurting, but it was very obviously those holes in him that he was gonna die of shock if he didn't get some morphine to take it through that. So after I did that, we left him by the way on that table. The Germans took us out of there and we left him on that table and he obviously, the Germans left him to be picked up by American troops coming through. So that's the way, that's the reason that he lived and was, they didn't try to take him because he couldn't walk anymore. He just stumbled into that little building.

OK, they put you into this kind of chicken coop thing, and then I assume they marched you out of there.

Robert Bearden: Yes, they moved us from the chicken coop into this little, there was a little store kind of looked like a store, and had a pretty good sizable plate-glass window and a little door to the right of that, and from there, they started marching us towards Paris. That was the object was to get us out of Normandy before the peninsula was cut off from the beaches across to the other side to the, I guess that would be the Mediterranean.

Yes.

Robert Bearden: And in time they did cut us across and it appeared that the Germans got us out of there by truck. They put us in a truck with a tarp on top and marched us down the roads between the trucks and marching. We did that until we came to Paris.

Was there any significant events in your passage from being captured to getting to Paris?

Robert Bearden: Yeah, pretty crazy. The American fighter planes were just patrolling the whole peninsula, the whole Shelbourne peninsula, looking for anything obviously, and they'd see these trucks. They just assumed that they were German trucks with supplies and munitions and so forth, so they'd try to strafe 'em of course, and we got in one situation where the road was cut out of a little hill, and there was trees on both sides and the Germans, I mean the American fighter pilots could not strafe down that road because of the trees overhanging, so they were strafing from side to side. Now these are, they were strafing with 20 millimeter canons, 50 caliber machine guns, and they would strafe from one side to the other. If you get against the bank from whence they were coming, you couldn't get hit because the bullet's gonna hit in the middle of the road and go up the other bank. And then when they go up and do, I don't know, I think it was Shondell or wherever we did, and turn around and come back the other way, you get

against the other bank and then both go the other way. I think about that and I think oh, why didn't we just die of shock? And they did that about oh I don't know, five minutes, and then took off. So I did that all there you could do. That was the craziest thing I believe ever in my life, being strafed by it, and when those guns fired, the whole front end of a fighter plane lit up because either the 20 caliber, 20 uh -

Millimeter canons?

Robert Bearden: Or the 50 caliber machine guns were all fired at the same time, and it would literally just eat away at one of those banks, incredible. We stayed there, about stayed there five minutes, then get back in the truck, and headed on towards Paris.

Was anybody hit?

Robert Bearden: Didn't see a single person get hit, not one because we were all doing the same thing. There was only a truckload there was maybe 20 in that truck.

OK. So then they got you to Paris by walking and by truck.

Robert Bearden: Yes, we went to Paris by walking and by truck, and we wound up at the Arc de Triomphe, and that is a huge, huge, looked like a, you know, 8-lane street that goes from there downtown Paris to the freight yards where the trains are, and they marched. By that time they had gathered up from different places, we joined a group of maybe two or three, there may have been 3,000, 5,000 of mostly American paratroopers, some people from D-Day, empty soldiers came ashore on D-Day and they just, I would say that I bet 80 percent of the people that were in that march had been hit. They were limping, they were carrying one another, you know, just dragging one another along. It was like, looked like the spirit of '76. We were really a beat up group of prisoners.

So I assume there was a substantial number of captured Americans at that time then.

Robert Bearden: I guess it was all they had captured at that time, and I wouldn't be surprised if somebody told me there were 5,000 of us because it was a huge crowd, and the Germans had gotten must have been 10,000 people to line both sides of that huge thoroughfare and they threw rocks at us, they spit at us, they threw sticks at us, cursed at us. You could not believe what went on, and I have been trying to get the French government to examine that, and if I am not lying, they owe us an apology. Ask anybody, I talked to the French foreign office and Washington and Houston and I've never gotten any response.

So these were French citizens who were actually –

Robert Bearden: I don't know who they were. I don't know where you'd get that many Germans. They were not in uniform. These were civilian people.

Civilians?

Robert Bearden: Yeah, and I don't know where they'd get that many Germans, certainly German civilians, because I'll tell you, they were just literally, it looked like a huge parade that you see in New York City where there are just thousands of people lining both sides of the street, and the thing about it is, you could tell they were cursing at us and shouting obscenities and stuff

and throwing rocks, sticks, spitting at us, running out, running out from the curb and spitting at us, and that really hurt. But let me tell you an interesting thing at that time. As columns march like that, as our marching GI's, they march fast for a while and then they stop and then go a medium pace. One time when we were stopped for a minute, I looked over and there was a nice government, looked like some kind of apartment or commercial building or something because it had French windows, beautiful building with kind of a porch out in front and there were these windows had laced curtains over them, and I noticed that at one end, the curtain would pull back and a face of what looked like a typical Frenchman with a little hat, he looked through that, pulled that little curtain back and looked both ways, and then when he saw that no one was looking, he did the V for Victory sign, closed that thing and left. And it was almost like you'd given me a shot of some kind of -

Which was a very dangerous thing for him to do.

Robert Bearden: My heart just leaped. I said hell yes, we can make it. And it's today, I was, you know I was sore from having been hit myself, and that really stirred me up. I said yeah, we'll make it. Whatever they got for us, we'll make it, we'll do.

Up to that time, how were you being treated by the Germans?

Robert Bearden: Well, we weren't, we weren't being treated, first of all we weren't eating. We did stop at a farmhouse some place and there was some corn there, ears of corn and lettuce, shucked these ears of corn and chew on that, but we just got fed hardly anything. In 90 days, I went from 163 pounds to 98 pounds.

Wow.

Robert Bearden: So we did not eat, and then of course when they put us on trains, they gave us about I guess 6 ounces of cheese, about three slices of what we called sawdust bread, and it may have had sawdust in it because it just crumbled when you were trying to cut it or eat it, and oh yeah, a tiny piece of salami, and that did us five days of food. And we got put on that train with a drink of water that we took there, and we did not get another drink of water for three days. And that is the worst torture a human being ever had. I saw the other day that my dog is pretty hot where we are here, been 100 degrees, and I looked out and saw my dog's water bowl was empty and I was so ashamed I went out and talked to him, turned the cold water on and waited until it got cold, filled his water bowl up. I felt so bad because I know what it's like to be without water, and incidentally that was August.

So pretty warm in France, huh?

Robert Bearden: The time we, no, yeah, August the 20th, I was at stalag 12-A which was the first stalag that we got to. So I guess the first train ride we took must've been in July and we must've gotten to stalag at Lindbergh, Germany, we must've gotten there, well as a matter of fact, we got there on August the 20th because that was my birthday and I had gone from 163, that's where they registered us, gave us our POW numbers, and we were then in touch with the National Red Cross, which simply meant that if they killed you then, they had some responsibility for it. Until then, they killed you, they'd do anything. You're just a casualty of the war.

Did any of the soldiers die on the shipment from Paris to the - ?

Robert Bearden: Yes, and fortunately I was not in the boxcars where they did, but you could imagine what American fighter planes did when they saw those trains going down the tracks. I never once heard them where they did not leave the engine blown up. Those were steam engines and they would strafe that thing until that steam engine boiler blew up, and boy, what a blow it did, and by that time of course the Germans were all in ditches on both sides of the railroad track and we were locked in those boxcars and never got out once. And we were locked in 'em with about a 35-gallon metal drum and that was our toilet. And at the end of two days or a day and a half or whatever, it was running over and we were having to lay in that, and that was just unreal. Just unreal. It was like what are you gonna do?

Did your train actually get strafed by American planes?

Robert Bearden: Oh yeah, it strafed, that one, I think that was the first train I was on got strafed and they stopped long enough to empty some dead and wounded GI's, out of some of the boxcars, and locked 'em back up and we went on down the road.

Those must have been some horrendously scary times.

Robert Bearden: Oh, well I tell you, you can run, you can run 7 feet in one direction, 31 feet in another direction, that's as far as you can run. So and when you could hear those 50 caliber bullets ripping up pieces of boxcars somewhere and the engine and those canons taking that engine out, and they would leave us sitting on the side of the road until they'd get another engine down there to hook 'em up and pull us on down the road.

Did you at any period of time while this was all happening sense that you were going to die?

Robert Bearden: You know, I don't, I don't know how you could have had any other feeling, but I do not recall that. I had a real epiphany and a real spiritual experience in that hedge row when that little spider plane flew over and found me there, well found that big gun there, and notified the USS Texas offshore where it was. I was at that hedge row that I really had experienced with the Lord a spiritual experience, so I had that with me the rest of the time I was in prison, and it was not like I was any Billy Graham, but I sure felt like that if I did get hit and killed, I knew where I was going.

That had to be very comforting to you in that time.

Robert Bearden: Oh mercy, good grief, because when I was in that hedge row, I never learned a verse of scripture in my life, when I was in that hedge row about to die from them, from the Germans going around searching the hedges, they had to get to me, I'm looking there's four hedge rows that surround this little pasture where the gun is, and I'm in one of those hedge rows and I'm seeing them go around. As a matter of fact, I was terrified, just terrified when they were about 6 feet from me, and I thought oh God, you know, this is, I'm gonna die right here, and I had about three rounds left in my M-1, and I could see 'em, I mean I could see this body right there, and it was a darned cow that was grazing on the little leaves in that hedge row, and she was gonna eat my cover away. If she stayed there long enough, there wouldn't be a thing, you know, for me hiding behind, and fortunately I couldn't scare her or they'd know somebody was in there, so I just sat there and I knew I was gonna die, and I'm dyslexic, and that being the case, I've never been able to memorize anything. I have no retention of anything I read or hear or see, and I told somebody the other day, I don't have any enemies because I never remember anybody

who has offended me, so anyway, I cried out, it happened to be a scripture I discovered later, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? That's what Christ shouted, screamed on the cross. And immediately behind that came this, another scripture in my head, Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for thou art with me, and with that, it was like God took a huge picture of his protection and mercy and healing and love in the form of maybe a warm honey or something and poured it over my head and went all down over my body, and as it did, I became totally, unequivocally, without any reservation, free of all fear. I had no fear whatsoever. Still gonna die in five minutes, I had no fear. And as a matter of fact, the first thing that came to my mind was God bless that poor Kraut who sticks his head through here. I'm gonna get killed, yes, but he ain't gonna do it. He's going home. Because I poked him right in the nose with an M-1 and shot his head off, so I thought that was very interesting. I'm a whole new man, and perhaps I do appreciate this time and I'm thinking about somebody else maybe for the first time in my life.

Wow. I guess you also owed some thanks to the USS Texas.

Robert Bearden: Oh mercy, well I'm gonna go make a talk there in September I think it is, and I told 'em, I says I got a love affair with that girl. Any time you need somebody to come talk, count me in because I got, I said I don't know how often you helped we alive ones that could tell you what she's done for 'em, but I guarantee you, I can tell you what she did for me. She absolutely saved my life and they said oh, they couldn't believe it that somebody had that experience. I said count me in, I've been there, yeah.

That's amazing.

Robert Bearden: I'm gonna make a talk sometime in September I think it is.

It's amazing that a Texas boy is saved by the USS Texas and the USS Texas and the boy both come back to Texas.

Robert Bearden: Isn't that something?

That is, that is, wow. OK, let's get back to the prison camp. You eventually got to –

Robert Bearden: Well we loaded on, we loaded on a freight train, 40 men to a boxcar, but while we were waiting to take off, some goofy little kid had a pen knife, a little old pen knife, and he was trying to dig through the wood floor of the boxcar he was in and made a hole that you could barely stick a match through, but the Kraut saw what had been done and so they took the 60 men out of that and they put 20 of them in three boxcars that already had 40 men each. So, no, they took – I'm sorry, they had 40 men in it like ours did. They took 20 men and put 'em in two boxcars which had 40, and that meant we had 60 people in our boxcar, and oh Lord, I tell you, 40 people in a boxcar, you cannot move. And when you read stories about somebody coming out of the Holocaust era, 150 prisoners in a boxcar, that ain't true. Bless their hearts, they just, they were just freaking out. There's no way. You couldn't stack 'em if they were dead, you couldn't stack 150 bodies in one of those European boxcars because they're only about maybe two-thirds the size of an American boxcar. They're not as large as ours, and I have pictures of 'em that are in my book, and so anyway, they took 20 and put 'em in our boxcar. Now instead of 40, we got 60. So it really was crowded then. And we took off down the track and headed for Lindbergh, Germany, and I guess maybe during that trip which I think lasted maybe five days counting the stops that we had, when those fighter planes would shoot up the

engines and we'd wait on a side for a spell, and incidentally, before we got to Paris, we stopped in a town called Allensone.

How do you say that?

Robert Bearden: Yes, it was a railroad town, and, they, we went into Allensone by trucks I believe and they had a little tiny, it wasn't even a prison, it was just a shed, and they put about, I don't know, there must've been maybe 60 of us in that. It didn't have any toilet or any water in it or anything, and they put, the Geneva Convention says that you cannot work an officer or a non-commissioned officer. You can only work privates and PFC's, someone less than an NCO. So I didn't have to work, but we hadn't been certified as American, International by the Red Cross, so they could work us, do anything else with us. So they had us trying to lay a railroad track that had been blown out by American bombers, particularly medium bombers, like B-25's and B-26's, and in one of these raids, they dropped a bomb big enough, this was the downtown Allensone freight yards, and they have a big red buildings, which I have since visited with I think 11 of my children and grandchildren and great grandchildren. One of those bombs had blown an engine, a little switch engine, had blown it right through the second floor of this, it looked like a railroad office building, red brick, and nothing was sticking out of that building but the fire box, you know, where they threw coal in, and the rest of it, the whole front end of the engine was sticking inside and could not be seen where it was stuck in the second floor of that building. It was so hilarious. Well they were trying to get us to lay that track. They were gonna tell us we're gonna lay this railroad track back. Well it was bent, the tracks were bent from this, from these bombs. It was the biggest joke you ever saw. And I said boy, this is as goofy as my guys are, if you think that and I had two of us, no let's see, yeah, two of us were, two of us squads were together, Bowens was with us and so was Duck, my gunner, and when, before we went to Normandy, they told you if you should happen to get captured and you become a prisoner, just screw up as much as you can without getting shot. Well, you didn't have to tell my guys that. They were trained to screw up. That's all they did. We stayed in some sort of confinement half the time because of them goofing off. So they were always jacking with the Germans some way to make the non-com's jump on the privates and make the officer jump on the non-com's in the German Army. That was our mission.

Did many of the Germans speak English?

Robert Bearden: Oh yeah, yeah, they spoke English. I spoke enough German, when I was a little boy, my grandma, my great aunts and uncles who were all born in Germany, if you ate, you had to ask for things at the table in German, so I knew a little German, and then we had some training in Ireland and in England in German language on how to drill prisoners, you know, if you're gonna move 'em, you have to be able to give 'em close order drill instructions in their language because they would not understand forward march or to the right flank march, left flank march, so you had to, so we had the training I guess. So I got, I had a few words in English and in German and but on the sides of this freight yard, the freight yard was, there were little cliffs on both sides and this, and they, they went back in and dug caves back in the tops of these little rises on each side of the railroad tracks so in case of freight, I mean a passenger train was in there in an air raid, the people could get out of the trains, run up there and get in those caves during an air raid, very clever thing to do. And there were, those little caves would hold about, I suppose they would hold 20 people crowded, and so when they were doing maintenance work on that railroad track, when we would hear an airplane way off in the distance, the Krauts were so freaked out about airplanes and air raids and fighter planes and bombers that man, they went ape every time they heard, they were a whole lot more afraid of our fighters than we were, and so when they'd

hear an airplane off in the distance, and they could hear 'em halfway back to England, they would start screaming and shouting, air raid!, and we would run up those cliffs, and we didn't have any equipment on or anything, we'd just drop our shovels and what we were working with, picks and rakes and so forth which is what we were working on with this railroad track, we'd run up there and get in those little caves and get like three or four guys get in a cave and get right up to the door and these poor Kraut guards, some of whom were Polish conscripted guards, they were actually Poles who had been captured and made to act as German guards, and they were guarding us, we would run up in there, crowd up in towards the front, and shout no, no, no!, and shove 'em back down that hill. They would go crazy with a gas mask and a big, huge rifle they had, it's a wonder they didn't shoot us, but they thought we were really true, that there was, that the cave was full, when actually there were only three people and it would hold 20, but they'd go crazy until the air raid was over. We just laughed our heads off. It could've gotten us all killed.

Certainly seems that way. Now OK, you eventually got to Lindbergh, is that what it was?

Robert Bearden: Yes, got to Lindbergh, stalag 12A, which is the first time we reached, were in touch with International Red Cross, where we became zwei und achtzig neun hundert seiben und zwanzig, my German serial number.

OK, and when you were there, we who just read history and so forth have read that the Japanese were absolutely horrendous to prisoners, but the Germans were not so bad to prisoners of war.

Robert Bearden: [laughs]. When's the last time you've been in a boxcar and strafed by a P-51 or a P-47? No, let me tell you something. I tell these young soldiers today when I have a case to talk to them, you can only get so scared, so hot, so cold, so thirsty, so hungry and you can't get anymore that way today than you could back when I was in the Army, nor when I was in the Army could you get anymore of those sensations than you can today. So if you can take me from 163 to 98 pounds in 90 days, I don't know, I don't know how quick the Japs can take you to make that change, but I doubt if it's any faster than that, but from time to time, a Gestapo member or a party member would pick out, pick a P38 out of its holder and shoot some soldier, but not often, not often did that happen.

Did you ever see it happen? Hello? OK, did you ever personally see any GI's shot by prison guards or anything like that?

Robert Bearden: Yes, I saw one on one occasion. We were, I don't know what the occasion was that we were lined up, we were lined up, maybe we were getting ready to board boxcars and you know, I wasn't standing right there next to where this took place, but I heard the, I heard the pistol fire and the word was that a guard had shot a prisoner, and I didn't, you know, I didn't see it and for that reason it's not in my book, but you know, it was just you stayed in such a state of shock in terms of awareness that you're free game, you know, and particularly until we had a number where they were responsible for us, but even after that in stalag 3C, the last prison I was in, the guys were stealing lumber out of an air raid shelter where they'd dug sand, down in sand, put timbers up to keep the sand from caving in and the prisoners were stealing it and they put two dogs in there, two German guard dogs in there, so the guys went out there, jumped in there to whittle some of that wood and it killed both of 'em.

Who killed them? The dogs killed 'em?

Robert Bearden: Yeah, the dogs killed both of 'em, both these guys, and but I'd much rather be guarded by a German with a rifle than I had by a dog, absolutely. Dogs have, don't know any such thing as mercy, and they are better trained to kill than the soldier is, I believe.

Did they have many dogs?

Robert Bearden: Oh yeah, had dogs, well I was never in, I was never around a prison where there were not dogs available to the guards. Yeah.

If you can, could you describe for us what life was like in the prison camps?

Robert Bearden: Well it becomes a routine. Everything is done, first of all, stalag 3C was a typical prison. Incidentally I was in stalag 12A, stalag 4B, at Muelburg, Germany, stalag 3C, and they called it a Berlin camp but it wasn't a camp. We were just parked in the Berlin freight yards during air raids until they were ready to take us about 20 miles down the road to stalag 3C. They just left us parked there in empty, in boxcars with you know, subjected to all of the air raids which were day and night, and that lasted a couple of days. But every prison I was in had a radio in it. I don't know where the radio was. I never heard one, never saw one, didn't want to know where they were, but every day we had a report from BBC and we knew exactly where the war was, we knew exactly who was doing what, both the Russians and the Germans and the American Allied Forces, and the Germans would be telling us, you know, they're pushing the American Army and British Army back into the English Channel. We heard, you know, we knew from the reports from Great Britain that morning that that ain't the case at all.

So you weren't totally isolated from events happening outside of your area. You at least knew how the war was going.

Robert Bearden: Oh yeah, yeah, and other than that, and I don't know how those, I don't know how those radios got in there, but and nobody like a guy like me, nobody knew where those things were and nobody wanted to know, so if they stuck a gun, you know, halfway down my throat threatening me, I couldn't tell 'em where the – and I didn't want to know, but every day like in stalag 12A is probably the best systematic. It was an old, like four year, four year old German prisoner, mostly British and Canadians, and they were old prisoners. They'd been caught back in Africa. So they really knew the ropes of being a POW, and they had this, every day they would have about, I don't know, I forget what time it was, something after lunch, they have, and I say after lunch like we got lunch, I mean in the afternoon, they would come around and some of them would say football scores, and when they talked about football, they were talking about soccer, and so they were, the guards would go up, our guards, GI prisoners, would go to the doors and in case the Germans came, the guards came, could alert 'em to quit the announcement of what the radio said today, and this guy Kip would come in there just like clockwork and within 10 minutes, he had read the information that they had gotten just, that they had gotten that morning off of, from BBC in England. And so we were perfectly aware, and I never saw it that well organized before, but every place else I was like in 12A, we didn't stay there long enough to get, to get familiar with that. We slept in a huge, in stalag 12A, the first official prison where we stayed in Lindbergh, they had what they called a desert tent. It must have been an acre or maybe bigger than that, a huge tent filled with sawdust and that's where all these prisoners just slept in the sawdust, and a crazy thing happened there. The first morning that I woke up there, I went out to the restroom to the latrine, which was just a hawk tent out there, I went out there and this, I looked up on the hill and I saw this 6-foot rabbit hopping across the skyline out there, and I thought oh man, I know we know big rabbits in Texas, but this is

ridiculous. I kept watching it hop and hop along and then it would sit back on its haunches and big old ears sticking out, and I just went boy, this is crazy. And so I went and got my gun and I said Duck, wake up. He was in the, sleeping in sawdust, and I said wake up, come here, come here, I said come here and I got, took him outside, he was wiping his sleep out of his eyes and he said what you doing, Bo? I said look up there, what do you see up there? I said man, he says man, that's the biggest jackrabbit I ever saw in my life. And I said ____, well that makes me feel so much better. I thought I was going crazy, and on the way back, we went, we passed by a guard and I said, I said what, you know, what kind of a rabbit is there ya'll got? And this guy spoke English. The American Air Force had bombed the local zoo and it was a kangaroo that got turned loose. [laughs]. I was never so happy in my life to find out that I wasn't seeing a 6-foot rabbit. I thought I'd lost it.

Yeah, you thought prison life was taking all your mind away.

Robert Bearden: Yeah, I thought it all got, I thought it was all over for me mentally.

So how many prison camps altogether do you think you were in?

Robert Bearden: I think I was in 12A, 4B, I don't think Berlin was really considered one, and 3C, and I don't think any of those in France you could consider prisons.

Why do you think they moved you around once they got you - ?

Robert Bearden: Well they moved us, they moved us further into Germany, see moving us from France, out of France, further into Germany, and then they moved us according to where they had the most accommodations, where they had buildings big enough to hold us. See for example like when they took us into 12A, every prisoner that I know that was captured from D-Day on went through stalag 12A. That's where they met the International Red Cross, got their numbers and so forth, and then didn't stay there long, left that place and I went to stalag 4B which was a huge prison of both Canadians, British, and Americans.

Was that the one in Lindbergh?

Robert Bearden: No. Lindbergh was 12A. 4B was Muelburg. And Muelburg was a very sophisticated prisoners, as a matter of fact had been there so long they had a huge tunnel that they were digging out of there, and later went out. I mean they went all the way and they were carrying, you'd go down there and they'd put sand in your pockets, wet sand where they were digging -

Is that the one from which the movie The Great Escape was made?

Robert Bearden: I don't know. You know, I never, I've never seen a movie like that but I've heard something about it.

Oh yes, called The Great Escape.

Robert Bearden: Well we, they'd put, we'd put sand in our pockets and this was in July or August, and it must've been August because I was in 12A on my birthday July, I mean August 20th, and shortly thereafter, I went to Muelburg or stalag 4B, and that's where this digging was going on. And you'd just go down in this hole and take this wet sand, put it in your pocket, and

go out and walk around the compound and rake back some of the dry sand, the light colored sand, rake it back, dump out the sand that was damp – it was a different color.

So you took part in building those tunnels then.

Robert Bearden: Yeah, well, I didn't, you know I wouldn't say I helped any significant amount, but two or three days, yes I did this and probably did it about maybe an hour, two hours at a time or something like that, and they just showed us, it was a very simple operation. Walk out there in the compound and -

Spread it around.

Robert Bearden: You know, in a real innocent fashion, just shove some sand away, take your little two pockets full of sand, wet sand, put it down there and rake that back over, and they never could tell it. And the tools that they got for digging this tunnel they bought, I understood, from Frenchmen. The French prisoners frequently worked outside the prison. Some of them were even married to women outside the prison, and they'd come and go. For example that one prison which was I guess that was 4B, they had, they had a piano. They had a big grand piano in there, and they said that thing had been brought in a piece at a time by French prisoners.

Why do you think they had special treatment?

Robert Bearden: Oh yeah, absolutely.

But why do you think they had special treatment?

Robert Bearden: Well, they didn't cause, they didn't cause the Germans any trouble, and you know, I don't know, they never did fight the Germans, you know, they never fought the Germans.

That's true.

Robert Bearden: No, not to any, not to any extent, to the best of my knowledge. You know, when I learn more about history I may discover that the French did fight, but most of my friends that fought in Africa, Sicily, Italy and France would say that next time we go to war, we'll throw in the French, we'll throw in the Italians and just give us some other partners but those. Anyway, they frequently worked in different kind of jobs, and of course the French, I mean the Germans needed civilian help, they needed civilian help in their farms and so forth, and they worked many, many German American POWs worked on farms, and it was not a bad deal because it was a good place to eat. At least you would eat if you were working on a farm and but the guys that worked in coal mines didn't do too good and you know, they worked 'em. They were not supposed to according to Geneva, they were not supposed to work NCO's which sort of supposedly cleared me, but I left my guys, my gunner, who was a New Hampshire dairy farmer, and my assistant gunner and my ammunition bearer, I left them all in stalag 4B and they moved me to stalag 3C which was just for NCO's, just non-commissioned officers, American non-commissioned officers. There was every other nationality imagined prisoners in this huge camp, but Americans, no, they were Americans that were NCO's. That was at Koostrian, which was about 15, 20 miles east across the Oder River from Berlin.

OK. These camps were extremely large I assume. There were thousands of prisoners there.

Robert Bearden: I didn't hear that.

I assume these camps were very large and had thousand of prisoners.

Robert Bearden: Oh yes, yes, a thousand prisoners and all different nationalities. As a matter of fact, in stalag 4B, I met with some guys that were bilingual, and to get in this group of about I don't know, maybe 20 guys, they'd be in this, I don't know what you'd like it'd be a recreational hall, wasn't anything in there, it was just a building nobody was sleeping in, and we'd meet in there and I spoke Spanish pretty good and I spoke English, and so I could communicate reasonably well with an Italian and of course anybody that spoke English. And they'd plant you around this circle to where you had a person on each side of you that you could communicate with, and it was just crazy. A story would start out over here and go around and I think we played this game, it was whispering a story around, and what it sounds like when it gets back around the circle.

It's entirely different, yeah.

Robert Bearden: Well it was just, it was just bizarre.

While you were in any of the prison camps, did you ever think about or attempt to escape?

Robert Bearden: I thought very seriously about it, and you look back and you could see good grief, I could've escaped there. As a matter of fact, my company commander, Captain Taylor, did escape, but he never got to a prison. He got into that shed where I worked on his bullet wound, he got in that shed, he was there and was in that chicken coop and between there and the time that we loaded up on trucks and headed – one night, while we were walking down the road, he must've just laid out, they would stop the column from time to time with guards on all sides and in back and in front, the German guards were walking, and frequently these were not Germans but they were either French or they were Poles forced into the German Army wearing German uniforms, and when they stopped like that, which any column does, and when they would stop like that, it was an opportunity to lay over in a hedge row and when they got up to leave, just stay there because all the guards and everything are gonna go off with the troops. It was easy, an opportunity to have escaped, and then stay hidden until the troops come through from the beaches. But I wasn't bright enough to do that, and I've heard of several people who did that, but beyond that, we knew in stalag 3C that if we could go up the Oder River and stay out of contact with Germans, because none of us spoke German fluently enough to disguise ourselves as Germans, but we all had food stored under our barracks in a hole that we had dug there and we dug that hole and did that sand the same way they were doing it in stalag 4B. We'd take it out and at that time, no they, when we were first digging that hole, I think that was, I think that was before the, I remember when the snows came. The snows must've come in September, October, because part of the digging we were doing, we were going out and moving snow back and putting dirt down and covering the snow back up over the dirt, and that was in stalag 3C. That was just across the Oder River, which is a huge, huge river, and we knew that if you could go up that river you would come to a town called Stateen, which was a port city, is that the Baltic up there?

I believe so, yes.

Robert Bearden: I think that's it, and it was a big port city and if you could ever get there, you could imagine, you could identify a non-German ship by the flag it was flying, stow away and perhaps get out, and that was the only thing. And we all, you know, we all had some visions of taking, see we got Red Cross parcels. We didn't get enough to, you know, we got, we were fortunate to get a five-pound American Red Cross parcel every week, and I shared about six parcels in nine months, I shared 'em with some other prisoner, so I got a half a parcel. I got about six halves of a parcel over a period of 9 months, and I would take for any one of 'em. I thought they kept me alive. And in those parcels were everything from cigarettes which you could use to barter with the guards which I did. I got a chocolate bar, which was great, a black market item. Coffee, large cans or small cans of powdered coffee which was a hot, hot item on the black market. The British POW parcels had even hotcakes, stuff you can make hotcakes with.

So you owe a bit of thanks to the International Red Cross.

Robert Bearden: Oh my goodness, oh, no question. I don't know how we'd live. First of all, there had been no one to have provided any monitor on us if it hadn't been the Red Cross. And the International Red Cross used to send representatives from Berlin about 20 miles from stalag 3C at Koostrian, twice while I was there, and I was there from I guess September to January 31st when the Russians overran that prison. So during that period of time, the International Red Cross sent people there twice and the Germans promised us your daily diet was one slice of sawdust bread, one small cup of watery soup, and that was your daily diet. And of course you know, you're gonna melt away to nothing. And you had zero exercise because I remember one time the Red Cross shipped us some athletic equipment like soccer balls, but we would stand up in the morning and in the afternoon for roll call. There were 40 prisoners in each barrack. And when they stand up in our barracks group to be counted, you'd hear clunk, clunk, clunk – this guy's passing out, he's passing out from malnutrition, and just you know, weren't able to stand up, and so you start talking about escaping, those guys, when you get like that, you're not gonna escape, you're not gonna go anywhere.

No, it takes everything just to stay alive.

Robert Bearden: Yeah, absolutely, and they oh, they did serve what they called imitation or ersatz for imitation coffee, it was just warm colored water, and the guys who shaved took it to shave with, but I didn't shave so I didn't ever use it for anything. But we got our bread at one time every day and we'd get our soup at one time every day. And the bread like every morning, the first thing, word that was going around the compound was how many men on a loaf, because if there were 8 men on a loaf of bread, that meant the slices are gonna be smaller than when there were 6 men on a loaf, and so the word up at the latrine every morning was how many men on a loaf today, and someone was, you know, sometimes they would, you could count on it and sometimes you couldn't pay any attention to it, didn't know anymore than I did about it, but that was always the word, how many men on a loaf? And one man in every barracks was assigned the job of cutting that loaf into six slices today, or eight slices today, and nobody wanted that job because number one, the guy that cut that bread got to pick his piece of bread last. He got the last piece of bread. So it better be cut evenly or he's gonna get a smaller piece than everybody else, but for taking that risk, he provides the blanket and the knife to cut it with and when he gets through cutting the loaf, everybody's picked up their slice of bread, he shakes his sawdust that has come out of this bread cuttings, he shakes it to the middle of the blanket, picks it up and eats it. Now he's eating it with wool or nylon fibers which was what the blanket is made of, but it's a

big deal, big deal, and every day the cutting of the bread was like communion in the Catholic church, big deal.

Wow.

Robert Bearden: And when they brought the soup by, they brought it up in a wooden barrel, half a wooden barrel with a big rod stuck through it and two men carrying it, and they'd just, they just ladled it out of a huge, hot metal drum over which it had been cooked, and if you found a piece of meat the size of your thumb nail, you didn't just eat it, you showed it around. You took it around and showed it to three or four of your better friends, that look what you got today, look what I've got, and today, my wife always kids about when we have soup – I love soup, I love soup to this day – but when we have soup, I'm always talking about man, that's good solids, good solids because that's always the word was what kind of solids were there today? When they ladle your soup out, what kind of solids did you get. It was some kind of barley. As a matter of fact the Germans said that Hitler was sterilizing us with the grain that he put in the soup and it was such a joke because my gunner, who was a New Hampshire dairy farmer, had six children whom I am in contact with today by the way, and I had five children, one right after the other, I had five children in six and a half years, so we communicated and laughed before he passed on about Hitler would have turned the flip if he had known what a poor job he did sterilizing us, and supposedly the rest of the prisoners were sterilized about like we were.

Did most of the prisoners maintain their military bearing?

Robert Bearden: Oh yeah, absolutely. Number one, I was, in every prison I was in, official prison, I was responsible to everybody that ranked me. Every prison, the highest ranking man there was the commander of that prison, and of course of the two master targets, whose rank dates the other one, who got their rank before. And it's just like it is out here at Fort Hood today, same thing.

So military discipline stayed with you at that time.

Robert Bearden: Absolutely. It would have been absolute chaos if you had otherwise.

OK, as you were imprisoned and this from June of 1944, and you're getting radio reports and you know that it's coming eventually to you, were you ever fearful of what the Germans might do before you got liberated?

Robert Bearden: We talked about that. We knew, we knew what the potential was. We knew that Hitler was crazy and he could say snuff all the prisoners, you know, and that would be the end of it. We'd have been gone. But Hitler was, he had his hands full trying to stay alive because the Russians are coming, the Russians are coming, and he knew it and I knew it because we were getting reports every day. And finally it got to where I was liberated or the Russians actually ran into our prison with tanks on January the 31st, 1945, and so I had spent from June 10th, '44 to January 31st, '45 as a prisoner, and the object, when the Russians were coming, all of the Germans that are in front of the Russian Army coming towards Berlin, all of the Germans were staying out in front of the Russians and running towards Germany, from the other side of Poland all the way through the frontier of Germany, everybody were abandoning towns. I mean they were towns like the size of Waco, Texas, or Austin, Texas, you know, not as sophisticated of course in those days, but they, the whole town would be empty.

Not only the military, but the civilians as well.

Robert Bearden: Oh yeah, yeah, well, the military were not, were competing, the German military were competing as best they could, but the Germans were just overwhelming, but the Russians were overwhelming the Germans at that time. The Russians had tanks, what they called to us a Stalinski tank. I know it was a better name than that, but the biggest tank the Russians had were engaging the biggest tanks that the Germans had which was the Royal Tiger, and you see the German military machine was beaten into the ground by U.S. Air Force and the British Air Force, literally bombing them 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. So nothing moved, nothing moved. If they needed supplies at an aircraft manufacturing plant in Germany, how you gonna get 'em there? You're not gonna get 'em there on the rail, you're not gonna get 'em there by truck, because everything that moved on the road, on the railroad tracks is gonna get blown off. So the U.S. Air Force, well we used to kid about 'em, you know, missing our drop zones and you know, I mean fly boys, all that, let me tell you as one old infantry soldier who really appreciates U.S. Air Force because they beat the German Air Force into submission, they beat the German Army into submission because the German Army had nothing with which to fight when our Air Force got through with them.

Were any of your camps accidentally bombed by Allied or American, British, or Russian planes?

Robert Bearden: Interesting experience we had in Allensone, and this shack that we were in was kind of out of downtown, probably about 3 miles from downtown I guess. It had no water, no sewer, no facilities or anything, and the American and German fighter planes got in a dogfight right over our prison one day, and we'd just come back from working downtown in the freight yard, and that was the most exciting, fantastic experience that a human being ever, ever watched. It was about ten times more dramatic and exciting and exhilarating than the most exciting football game or athletic competition you ever watched in your life, seeing them get on one another up there at 12,000 feet and chase one another down to the ground until somebody's got to pull out, and the one behind waits until they pull out and turns all those guns loose, and they just filled the sky with ME-109's, German Foker fighter planes, P-47's and P-51 Americans, and they roared down there and chased one another right into the ground and when they'd pull out, it would shake that end of France, and those guns, you could just see just the front end of that whole airplane would light up when they would, American particularly, when they would pull those triggers and we would see parts fly off of a German fighter plane, and we only saw one American bail out, but we saw maybe four or five German fighter pilots bail out, and of course it was, oh what a, and they say we're out there cheering like it's a football game, and the Kraut guards are going crazy, but finally they put bayonets on their rifles and started coming up, poking us with their bayonets and we went back inside, but the fighting was just about over at that time. It didn't last, it didn't last 10 minutes, but it was the most dramatic 10 minutes that I've ever seen.

Wow, what an experience to carry with you.

Robert Bearden: Never saw anything like it before or since, and so you know, when I meet a fighter pilot who has combat experience, boy he has my respect. I just, and that's what I wanted to be when I went to the paratroops. I took the Air Force exam and on the form I filled out, said what'd you want to be, I wanted to be a fighter pilot, and that's where about 20 percent of paratroopers wound up paratroopers because they busted the mental test for, busted the optical test, yeah.

Physicals and -

Robert Bearden: Yes, to become a fighter pilot.

OK, so you're living this mundane, I assume, daily existence, regimented existence, waiting and hoping for liberation, and you had to have known it was getting closer and coming. I'm assuming you heard more and more planes, you heard guns in the distance and things like that, and getting the reports from BBC. So I assume you were becoming a little more optimistic.

Robert Bearden: Yes, more optimistic and anxious. We were, you know, we were getting ready and we also knew that the German, any prisoners that were in front of the – any prisoners that were significant that were in front of the Russian Army coming through the west towards Berlin – for example, there was a huge German prison for American Army officers in Poland. They got them up and marched them towards Berlin by German guards, marched them a long walk, and this was the coldest winter in the history of Europe, and they marched them night and day to get 'em out of there so the Russians wouldn't overrun them and set them free. And they were doing our prison the same way, but they were taking the prisoners out in direct association with how hostile they would be if they were liberated. For example, if the most hostile and anti-German prisoners they had were Russians, because they were terribly abused. The Russians hated the Germans. The Germans hated the Russians, and they bitterly abused each other. The Germans going towards Russia initially through Poland and then the Russians coming back, it was just slaughter, literally lining people up and shoot 'em dead. I went to a field one time where there was 60 ____ shot dead, and not only shot dead, but after they were, they were shot and knocked dead, they'd run over 'em with Russian tank tracks, and just you know, how animalistic do you have to be to shoot a guy and when he's down on the ground after you having shot him, run over him with one of those big tanks, and it would mash the man's head out like you could see his features, only they were a big, round, when that tank would go over a guy's face, the features was there, you could still see where his nose was, his mouth was, his ears, whatever, but it was spread out. Now if that isn't the most bizarre sight you ever saw in your life, and there were 60 of 'em out there. All of 'em had been run over like that, and so you know, that was, that was just something that we knew, we knew that the Russians had a capacity that was as animalistic as the Germans was. So but the Russians, the Germans knew the people they could get out of there better be the Russians because it ain't gonna be good if the Russians are liberated, and indeed when some of the Russians in our prison, stalag 3C, were liberated, you wouldn't believe the brutality that took place. For example, I set and watched a little female Russian tank commander sitting on the front bumper of one of those big Russian tanks with a 38 caliber pistol in her hand, and a German soldier backed up to her, so and there's another soldier that's facing the other direction on the other side of that tank, with a guy, in other words each one of those two guys can see that the other one's gonna get shot, but they don't know that they're gonna get shot. She would bark an order and they would both shoot at the same time and blow the back of their heads off. Pretty brutal, and not that, stack 'em over there, you pull 'em off to the side and take two more there. Then they would take 'em, the Germans that they captured there in stalag 3C, the guards, and take 'em to what we called a delouser, and when they, the only time that they deloused us, the only shower I took in nine months, they took us and gave us a shower and then took our clothes and put 'em in a delouser room which was just a room that they filled with steam and this steam killed the lice in our clothes. Now then they're gonna give us our deloused clothes back, but they're gonna take us back and put us right back in the same small room, all 40 of us, with the lice that were in the room to begin with. So it was a joke.

Thanks for nothing.

Robert Bearden: It was an absolute joke, but the Russians took the German soldiers, guards, and put 'em in that delouser, closed the door and turned the steam on. What a way to kill somebody. And I heard and never went back to check because I didn't, I'd seen all of the brutality that I needed to see, but somebody told me that that steam on those guys in there somehow drew them up and made 'em look like a mummy, not a mummy, but you know, a little dwarf of some kind. Apparently I got the impression it took the moisture out of their bodies or something, but I never went over to see, so I don't know whether that's true or not. All I knew was that they were sticking them in those delouser units and we had a couple of guards that pretty nice guys, and we took the best care we could of them and hid them to the best we could to get 'em out across the Oder River, because the Oder River was the last natural defensive barrier for the German military. They would defend that with everything they had, which they did. I tried to make crossings with the Russians in hopes that I could go west and join American forces which were coming from the west toward Berlin. They were coming from the west to the east while the Russians were coming from the east to the west, and they're gonna meet at Berlin, which they did. They met the other side of Berlin. So I had hoped to maybe the Russians would cross that river, I could go with them and meet American forces 50 miles to the west. But these crazy Russians would turn, run those tanks out on that ice, the frozen Oder River, and when they'd get to the middle of the river where the ice was not so thick, the tanks would drop through to the bottom. One after the other they did that, and it was just such a futile effort that the Germans having been beaten to the ground by the American Air Force, everybody, every branch including the German Navy had been beaten to oblivion by the American Navy and American Air Force, so they might have think they had to fight with, but they just fought to the bitter end, and it as such, I stood there and looked at the situation and I told some guys I was with, I don't believe those Russians are ever gonna cross the Oder River, and the Oder River, the other side of the Oder River was about 15, 18 miles from Berlin.

This is after you got loose. Let's go back to that liberation bit. You talked about when they were liberating, the brutality with which they treated the Germans as they got through the camp. What did the Russians do with regard to the prisoners?

Robert Bearden: Number one, it was an interesting fact that they didn't even, the Russian military, I don't know, with these crazy youths that were coming through, there had to be a general along there somewhere, but certainly there were colonels and so forth in the Russian Army and there was Russian armored units, they didn't even know stalag 3C was there, and there probably was 8,000 Russian prisoners there, and they didn't even know that there were any prisoners there, and so they just blundered on through and came in and on the day, the 31st of January, as they showed up at the prison, they were getting ready to move us American prisoners out.

The Germans were getting ready to move you out –

Robert Bearden: The Germans were getting ready to move American prisoners out because they had already moved as many Russians as they could. They got them all out, so now they were trying to get the Americans out, because we're not that brutal. They know that we're not gonna slaughter them if we're liberated. The Russians didn't do anything with us. They ignored us. They just looked for Germans, to kill Germans, and incidentally, the uniforms, the German prison uniforms that we wore were Hungarian military infantry uniforms, and on the front and on the back, it would have KGF printed on the back on the pants, KGF for kriegsgefungen, means

German prisoner, so if you left, you ran, and tried to escape, you would be identified mainly by they saw that. Well, the Russians thought that our uniforms being Hungarian, that we were Hungarian troops forced into German military service, so the first guy, the first Americans that they saw as they were marching us out of the camp up the Oder River towards the first bridge crossing, they pulled up there with a big Russian tank and cut down the first 200 guys in our column. I never did see these guys, but the word was that the first 200 guys of our column got killed.

Because they thought they were Hungarian –

Robert Bearden: Yeah, I never saw that, but I did hear the guns firing away up there, the tanks, and so when that happened we just turned around and ran back into the prison. I was no more than maybe 200 yards out of the gate when I ran back into the prison because I'd seen what had happened. You see, we'd been hearing these artilleries for two or three days. We'd been hearing the Russian and the German artillery fighting, those tanks fighting each other back to the east towards in Poland. And obviously the Russians were beating the Germans and the Germans were retreating, and so that's what was taking place and we were hearing those guns out there for at least two days, probably three days, just knowing and hearing our radio report, we knew what was going on, and but you know, we had no idea how long it would take 'em to get there, and all of a sudden the Germans were moving us out and bang, we find out the hard way that that's them right there. A German spotter plane was flying over the prison and leaning out and pointing east, trying to tell the German soldiers on the ground that the Russians are just right back there, and indeed they were, and they showed up with those big tanks and thinking the first guys that they saw were Hungarians, shot 'em with machine guns and canons, and when that happened, we turned and ran back into the prison. We had a hole dug, everybody had holes dug underneath their barracks. These barracks floors had two floors, two floors because these barracks were put together with bolts. They were not nailed together traditional, they were put together with bolts and they could put 'em together, take 'em apart almost overnight, and each floor was double floored, and we had our two floors, one would raise up and the bottom floor would slide away and we dug a hole down in there that was about, oh I guess it was 4 or 5 foot deep and probably 6 foot square, and that's where we'd take that sand out and put it under the snow, and in that we had everything that was contraband. Anything that you didn't want the Germans to have you put down in there, any food. They didn't want us to have, keep any canned POW parcels because if you had it, you could use it to escape with. So every time they issued a prison parcel which I think was two times, they would have a German soldier there with a nail and a hammer putting nail holes in every can so it would spoil if you tried to keep it. So one of our efforts had to be somebody had to perfect a system to keep the Germans from putting as many holes, as few holes in those cans as possible and getting more cans back to the barracks without holes in them. As you could see, that was to a great advantage because if they didn't have holes in them, they would last indefinitely and under the barracks. If they had holes in them, you know, you have to eat it pretty quick or it's gonna spoil. So that was just one of the drills that went on, and I mastered that system and was ingenious with my devious ways of figuring out to have those cans punched with nail holes on one side with two, maybe three holes on one end, and the last hole we punched, he thinks he's punched one hole in that can because I've got fingers on two other holes in that end of the can and he's looking, punching holes the other way, I turn the can over and he's looking seeing no holes in there because I've got two fingers on two other holes, and he puts another hole in that can, so that can winds up with three holes in each end, and another can has got no holes in it, and it was just, it was just sort of like you know, being ingenious to live is what it amounted to.

Yes, a game of survival.

Robert Bearden: So that food had a little thing we called a, I don't know, it was a cooking device where we'd get a handful of coal every week or so, and each man, and so we had a little device, I'm forgetting what the name it was called, but it was a little cooking device where you could turn the little crank and it would blow air through cans that were put together with cement that was made out of klim, which was milk spelled backwards, that came in prison parcels, in the Red Cross parcels, it was klim, every klim, every prison parcel had a can of klim in it, and you could take that and make paste out of it and use it sort of like you would glue. Very clever the guy that developed that. And so we had these, that was one of the things on those cookers were down in our holes and three of us had agreed to stay in that hole with the two floor parcels down in place when everybody else was forced to leave, and we were gonna stay in the hole. I was one of them. We had planned this oh, a week before I guess, maybe longer than that, that three of us were gonna stay down there in that hole when the last days came and the Russians were moved in on us, so somebody would be there to tell the Russians what we knew of the Germans. And unfortunately, I got diarrhea right before the Russians came through and I had to back out of that deal because obviously you couldn't stay in there with diarrhea, so I did not stay in the hole, and the guys that stayed in it did not have to stay in it long because the Russians ran through and I was there trying to figure out could I cross that river. I was on the river bank a couple of times and trying to decide should I go across with them, because they had left some of their own people on the other sides in some of their futile attempts to cross it. And finally I told the guys I was with there I don't think that they're gonna cross the Oder River ever.

But how did you get from the camp to the Oder River?

Robert Bearden: Well we were 500 yards from the Oder River.

Oh, your camp was that close.

Robert Bearden: Yeah, it was right on the Oder River.

Oh, OK.

Robert Bearden: Yeah, and this river is you know, like maybe the Mississippi.

Yes, it's big, yeah.

Robert Bearden: And so finally I said they're not gonna cross that Oder River, and I said I'm gonna go east, I'm gonna go east until I come to Texas. That's just what I had in my head. I'm someday if I go east long enough, somewhere I'll come to Texas. So I'll just go, headed east. And, and the thing that is so interesting about this whole deal, I was enrolled at the University of Texas in Austin, Texas as a student before the Russians crossed the Oder River.

Is that right?

Robert Bearden: Now is that not crazy?

Wow.

Robert Bearden: Was I ever right. Man, that decision because I'll tell you, that was going to be very risky if I crossed that durn river on one of those tanks because they may make it and they may not, and you're not gonna make it to the other side any way except on one of those tanks, and so anyway -

So they didn't get across the river until near the end of the war –

Robert Bearden: Yeah.

Which was in April and May.

Robert Bearden: Yeah, and you know, they were heading, they were heading to Berlin, on Cornelius Ryan who wrote The Longest Day also wrote a book called The Last Battle, and that was a fight for Berlin and as a matter of fact, my name is listed as Sergeant Robert L. Bearden in the back of The Longest Day, and I wrote to Cornelius Ryan and I said when are you gonna write the rest of my life story? Which he wrote when we come in and going out of Europe, and he wrote back with some kind of clever remark. But I just headed east.

OK, but you just made the decision by yourself, or was this a group of people?

Robert Bearden: Yeah. No, I could, I had been trading, I had been, I was a trader trading Red Cross parcel components, pieces – a can of coffee, a large can of coffee, a small can of coffee, a bar of chocolate, a pack of cigarettes – for bread, for oatmeal, for all kinds of things that the Germans had to get from their kitchen, the German guards. I was trading with the German guards, and I really couldn't call it trading. I was stealing from the German guards because for example, first thing I had to do is to make a deal with a guard who's walking a post up and down. Now I know that he knows if he gets caught trading with me, he goes straight to the Russian front which is a death sentence. Nobody comes back from the Russian, no German soldier comes back from the Russian front with all of his limbs. They don't come back unless they've lost limbs or the top of their heads or whatever, or they're dead. They just don't come back, so that's a death sentence if you get caught trading with me. So you're not gonna snitch me off however bad I mess you over. I know that and he knows it. So I'm pretty clever about using the best German that I had to talk this guy into agreeing to give me two loaves of bread for a large can of coffee. Now that's, I can't tell you how valuable two loaves of bread is when you're getting one slice of bread a day. So -

Why were you getting these things?

Robert Bearden: How's that?

Why were you accumulating these things?

Robert Bearden: Why were you accumulating -

The bread and the things and what have you.

Robert Bearden: Oh well, if you're just getting one bread a day, one piece of bread a day and that is your staff of life, see, then bread is your key to staying alive, and coffee is not gonna keep you alive, but two loaves of bread probably keeps you alive a long time. So if I could get a guy two loaves of bread for a large can of coffee and he'll give me one slice of bread for making the

deal, then I've got a slice of bread that I didn't have. It was just a bargaining deal that's going on.

But were you accumulating this for an escape or to have with you when you had to find your way out, or what? Hello -

Robert Bearden: …from stalag 3C at Koostrian, well I decided that they were not gonna cross that Oder River, I headed east, and I had about a half a dozen guys with me who knew German and you know, they were looking for a leader and I suppose I was a leader.

And these were Americans?

Robert Bearden: Yes, yes these were all Americans and they were all NCO's, they were all sergeants.

So there was no organizing of all of the prisoners to go in a given direction –

Robert Bearden: Absolutely, there was no -

It was chaos.

Robert Bearden: Absolute chaos. Nobody was telling anybody anything and what we had, whatever system we had was completely broken down by the way it occurred with the Russians coming up there and blowing the 200 guys away, and so anyway I just decided about two or three days after the Russians arrived, I decided I'm gonna head east and I think was thinking I'm gonna stay on the Russian, in the Russian supply line where the Russian trucks are bringing supplies to the front, and that way I won't run into some isolated pockets of German soldiers, because the Russians would come to a town coming from the east to the west, they come to a town and rather than fight for it, they just go around and cut it off, and here's a town that's got a German division in it in one case, had a German division in the town. It was completely cut off, completely cut off.

Weren't you concerned having the Hungarian uniform on?

Robert Bearden: No, because shortly after this all took place, we started to grab all kinds of clothes and sometimes it was a mistake. I got some Dutch wooden shoes, for example. I thought these are gonna be better than those shoes I got. Wrong. Just kill your feet. I walked half a mile until I was looking for something else to put on my feet. This here we were walking in deep snow and we headed east, I headed east, came to a town where everybody had left, no people in this town. Well in this town was a huge store about like Sears Roebuck maybe, a department store. In there, I found 60 pairs of real silk hose. I knew that I could be able to use those somewhere, sometime. Stuffed 'em down inside my bosom. I found two very, very expensive like ermine half link fur coats. I put one of 'em on the inside with the fur in, one of 'em with the fur on the outside and buttoned 'em up and was warm as a bug in a rug, and I headed on east in that same town, I found a wood burning Volkswagen bus that a little Russian soldier showed me how to fire it up and I drove it out through a plate glass window.

Is that right?

Robert Bearden: Drove it right out through a plate glass window and had visions of taking this back to Texas with me. And so I went on down the road and I found this -

You still have these other men with you?

Robert Bearden: No, pretty quick I did, they didn't stay with me long because I think after about a week, they started having fits at night. They just come unglued and I knew that I was so fragile emotionally that I couldn't take much of that. I did my best with them for several days, and finally I just decided you know, man, I got to go it alone. And so I took off and I was alone when I was in that store. And I forget exactly how you did it, but there was a tank on the back. I have seen one of those since in a book with this tank on the back, you put coal or wood in there, start a fire, you had to have water, and I guess it ran off of steam.

Just steam, yeah.

Robert Bearden: Anyway, I had visions of driving all the way back to -

Texas.

Robert Bearden: …to Russia with it, and I saw a dentist office by the sign they had in front. I went in and took all of these beautiful dentist tools and put 'em in a sack and put 'em in that little Volkswagen bus, and I had visions when I got back to Dallas that I was gonna sell those and be a rich man. And I was, I heard some noise and I looked up and there was a Stuka, German Stuka bomber which was the bomber that it was a dive bomber.

Yes, yes.

Robert Bearden: Oh awesome, awesome airplane. I never was exposed to one until this time, and I saw that and I said surely he wouldn't come after a little Volkswagen bus. Find out that yeah, hell he's coming after me. And so I ran, got me in a ditch, and he set that sucker on fire and there went my dentist tools, and so I was back on the ankle express, and from there I rode horse, I rode horse and buggy, I rode a bicycle, I rode freight trains, and on a freight train for example -

How did you get bicycles and horses and –

Robert Bearden: Oh, I was just going through a village and nobody was there.

Nobody was there, OK.

Robert Bearden: Nobody was there and hear some horses, and I don't know, I never did like horses. Horses always abused me, but they sure were nice to have around then. And one time I'll tell you how desperate this scene was. One time I was stopped working on my bicycle. I had a bicycle and having trouble with the chain. I was working on that and I heard some noise and I looked and down this snow packed, this snow was packed in the road, and along came a little wagon with about 10 little dogs. I'm talking about little house dogs hooked up in harnesses pulling a little wagon that had about four or five artillery shells on it. I looked at that and I said surely, you're not gonna support that big armor unit up there on the front with this sort of transportation. And I'll tell you, if they hadn't had the Studebaker truck, boy they'd still be there, I'll guarantee you. That was the biggest joke I ever saw in my life and I saw it several

times later on. I'd see a man come along in a wagon with about 25 artillery shells in it, one little horse pulling it, he's setting up in the middle, I was working on my bicycle. Another time this guy came by, he says "hi, Yank." And I said dang, I thought he said "hi, Yank." This guy was educated in Pittsburgh or Philadelphia or something like that. It was so crazy. I was about to go nuts and exposed to these ____, sometimes I think now I'm going crazy. But I went on back through and I would come to a town, I mean most of this trip I'm going to Moscow. So I made most of the trip in freight trains, and when these freight trains would come to a town, they'd stop for water or whatever and take on people and some other boxcars, civilians or soldiers, and I would always be in a boxcar and have me some hay over in a corner where I had my little nest, and I'd get off and in front of every one of these stations for the benefit of the passenger trains, these little farm ladies would come out and set up their little coffee tables, and they would have baked goods, they'd have canned goods, fruits, vegetables or a can and everything and all kinds of baked breads and stuff. I'd get off and hold one of these 60 pairs of hose I had, hold one of these hose up and they'd oo and ah over them, they'd all gather up and I'd pull out the others and I'd say now here's the other ones, and I want some of this and this and this, this, and give me this stuff for the other hose. I'd go get back on that train and I'm eating like a king going down the road.

So you were surviving by the use of your silk stockings.

Robert Bearden: Yes sir, absolutely, and I don't know how far they took me, but I think they took me all the way to Moscow. I think I still heard some where I got to Moscow, and I was in Moscow freight yard. Well I was feeling good then. I'd been eating all that stuff, and I mean every time we stopped, I'd make a deal and they just give me whatever they had for those because I knew my mother had told me that there were no silk stockings available in America, so I knew when I saw those in that store that that had to be something that would be treasurable, trade worthy on down the road and so I just traded up a storm going down the road. And when I got to Moscow, I was in the Moscow freight yards and there was everything was covered with snow and there were some real Russians dancing on a flat car, coat, the flat car was covered with snow and one little Russian had a little squeeze box and he'd play music, they did a Russian dance, and I got up there and I started to try to do this Russian dancing with them, and a little Russian girl who spoke English a whole lot better than I did Russian, she said you teach me dance. I said – no, you teach me jitterbug. I said yeah, I'll teach you to jitterbug. The funny thing about it is, back in the prison, a guard in one of those guard towers had told me one time, big huge guard, and guards would walk up to his tower underneath and turn around and go back down their post, and he was up in the tower, machine guns and lights and everything, and he said would I teach him to speak English? And I said sure I'll teach you to speak English. And so I started teaching him English and these other guards would come up and he would beat himself on the chest and he was gonna teach them, let them hear how he speaks English, and he would say me big fathead Kraut, me big fathead mm-hmm Kraut. That's what he thought he was speaking English.

You're lucky somebody who was German didn't understand what he was saying.

Robert Bearden: Man, it was so hilarious. Well, I was glad I got out of there before he found out what I'd been teaching him. So anyway I, somebody showed me there, they said that they read a sign over there in the Moscow freight yards, and I read a sign that said all American Allied prisoners of war report to Odessa, Russia. And you know, I said where in the hell is Odessa, Russia? They said that train is making up over there to Odessa. I ran over there and got on it with my stash of stuff and about three or four days later, still selling my stuff. I don't

remember when I ran out of the stuff I had. I was in Odessa, Russia, and the Russians put me in a building, a prisoner, and guarded me just like I'd been in German prison, and we stayed there I don't know, maybe 10 days or two weeks or something eating and very, feeling very free, right on the, next to the beach or the docks in Odessa, Russia. And I caught a British freight, a British person, I believe it was a passenger ship that brought Russian prisoners that were being let, brought back to Russia, that the Americans had liberated over in France. They were bringing them back. I did not know, but a book called Soldiers of Misfortune told me, tells you that the Russians, Roosevelt, Stalin, and Churchill, were dividing up Europe. Roosevelt was a non-player because he was about to die. Stalin says send back all of the prisoners that you're liberating. Churchill was saying no, we're gonna need them because we're gonna have trouble with the Russians when this war is over, and was he ever right. So Stalin probably said I'm not liberating, I'm not gonna send anymore American Allied prisoners back if you don't start sending the prisoners back that you're liberating. So I am convinced from that book, Soldiers of Misfortune, that I caught the last ship with American Allied prisoners out of Russia, and we went out of there across the Black Sea through Istanbul to Athens, Greece. Athens, Greece to Cairo, Egypt, Cairo, Egypt to Italy where we finally met American authority.

Give me a date. When did you get to Italy?

Robert Bearden: I got to Italy, I must've gotten to Italy, oh I'll tell you because it was just before Roosevelt died, and so if you find out when Roosevelt died, I got there about 10 days before Roosevelt died, stayed there about a week, and we'd been at sea probably a week before Roosevelt died. As a matter of fact, I ran into one of my high school buddies on this ship. He was going back to the states because he had finished his bombing mission as a pilot, and we went inside to get out of the wind and were standing inside by a door and talking about old times and back in Adamson High School and everything, and a guy jerks open the door and says well if you're coming in, come on in. I said what are you talking about, coming in where? He said confession. I said oh man, neither one of us never been to confession. I understand we've just got 10 days before in Boston. We ain't got time, so just, said thanks for _____. So that's how, how we wound up in Boston in about 10 days and caught a train out of there to Dallas, Texas.

So you were, the war was still going on.

Robert Bearden: Oh absolutely. I just enrolled with University of Texas in August to a quarterly system while the war was still going on, had access to all those beautiful co-eds because I didn't, had no healthy men there. Everybody that was healthy that's of age is all over the world fighting the war. I don't know what people are there, people like me there, ex-POW's or guys with seeing eye dogs and you know, been shot up and so forth.

How did you get mustered out?

Robert Bearden: Well I went to, first of all they sent us to Little Rock, Arkansas. No, Hodge___, Arkansas, for so-called rehab. Stayed there about a week or 10 days or something doing some rehab work and trying to make us humans again I think. And I went from there, I went to visit a guy that was running track with me in high school, and someone told me he was stationed, or he was in college at University of Texas running track for UT. And so I went down there and visited him and stayed five years.

So OK, what a life. OK, you had, you got out of prison camp –

Robert Bearden: On January 31st, the Russians overran the prison.

Then you had this long journey through Russia to Moscow, back to Odessa, on the ship, through the Black Sea, all the way down back to Italy, onto another ship, back to Boston and then down to Arkansas, and somehow you then got mustered out.

Robert Bearden: Yeah, got mustered out at Fort Sam Houston and went back home, and that's where I found out that Rick's college was at UT. So I went down to visit him and stayed five years.

Why did you do that?

Robert Bearden: Why? Well I just, I knew I had the GI bill coming, and I knew I had a lot of it coming, and I just thought that the word was that that's where you go to make a living, you know, go to college and you'll make a living. Incidentally, about oh, a number of years ago, I talked my son, one of my sons into staying in college and he finally said no, in Austin, to junior college, and he said no, dad, I'm gonna get out and be a fireman, and he later on one of his brothers told me he become a fire chief in Austin, and one of his brothers told me, said daddy, you know what David made last year? I said no. It was either $137,000 or $167,000, and I called David up immediately and said son, I'm sorry I tried to talk you into going to college.

But you did.

Robert Bearden: I went to college and made half that much, best year I ever made I guess. No, I had some pretty good years, but -

Did you graduate from UT?

Robert Bearden: Yeah, I graduated when I left, oh within five hours, and I got half of it by correspondence at Texas Tech, and I commuted from Killeen, Texas to get my last two hour report writing course off, and I spent five years there, four years as a cheerleader.

What did you get your degree in?

Robert Bearden: I got my degree in banking and then I later started this Christian Farms Treehouse, it's very significant successful drug and alcohol treatment program.

OK, I want to talk about that, but first let's the cheerleader part.

Robert Bearden: Oh the cheerleader, that was dynamite. Somebody said, you know, needless to say, everybody wanted to hear my story.

There wasn't many male cheerleaders back then.

Robert Bearden: No Lord, there weren't many males around to speak of, and there were very few, very, very few GI's that were functional. You know, they were in wheelchairs or something else if they were back, and just because I'd been a POW, I got the maximum benefits and I'd been in the Army the sufficient time until I had five years of eligibility on the GI bill and at the end of the first semester, I was on scholastic probation and they called me to tell me I had to leave because I couldn't make it, and I discovered that they couldn't kick a disabled veteran out.

And so I'm good for five years. When I found out they couldn't kick me out, yeah, I was a cheerleader four, I was cheerleader three years, and the fourth year, no the third year I was head cheerleader, and then the next year I came back and worked as assistant again. I had such a good deal going.

Did you ever study?

Robert Bearden: Well, not enough to ___. The people were jumping out of college, jumping out of the tower, committing suicide, going out in the canoe out in the lake and shooting themselves, and my mother read about this and she wrote me and she said, oh Bobby, please don't take your stay so seriously as to do something like that. I said yeah, I wrote her back and said yeah, honey, don't worry about me. I don't think I'll be shooting myself over grades. So I stayed on scholastic probation practically my whole time there, and yes I do have a diploma and I keep thinking that some day somebody will, a distinguished looking man will knock on my door and hold his hand out and say Bob, give it back.

OK. You eventually got out of UT, and got your degree.

Robert Bearden: Yes sir.

And eventually did something very worthwhile.

Robert Bearden: Yeah, I started this program, Christians Farms Treehouse.

Now what was it – Christian –

Robert Bearden: Christian Farms and Treehouse, and the Treehouse was for women, Christian Farms for men, and it's been in business now about 35 years I guess.

Still operational?

Robert Bearden: Yes sir. I ran it for 25 years, and I had my long overdue heart attack and had, I got into that program. I started that program because I had PTSD, post traumatic stress disorder, they know now. Back then they called it agrophobia. I had terrible fear and didn't know what I was afraid of, but I couldn't get out of my house and I was freed from that confinement through a spiritual awakening with some ladies who were meeting in my home in what they called a prayer group, and they taught me some spiritual things that have been with me ever since, and when that happened, I went down in the streets of Killeen where Vietnam veterans were coming back really messed up on drugs, and little girls, young ladies coming from all over the United States to Fort Hood and to Austin because drugs were good and cheap, and so I started leading them to the Lord and out of drugs, and I said well, I got to have some place to put 'em, so I had a little farm with some greenhouses on it, and I took those greenhouses and turned them into dorms for the males and females and that's where Christian Farms started and they can handle about 35 drug addicts and alcoholics today with really professional staff and very successful.

What accomplishment.

Robert Bearden: And that's a program that through which President Reagan advised me in 1987 to come to Washington and receive the President's Child Safety Partnership award.

I saw that, a photograph of that on your web site of you and the President handing you the award. And that was in 19- ?

Robert Bearden: '87.

'87?

Robert Bearden: Yes.

I'm sure that made you feel rather proud.

Robert Bearden: Well it, you know, it yes, it was, I knew how unsuccessful most treatment programs were, and they were just many of them were just head trips, and you know, and psychology just wasn't working. Psychiatrists, psychologists were not making it. And 80 percent of the people who came to my program had already been through two or three medical programs.

Do you still participate in the program yourself?

Robert Bearden: They consider me now as an advisor and so and I know you ___ as an advisor, but from time to time I hear from people usually around Christmas of people who were healed of their drug habits, and the AA will never talk about being healed. They think once you're an alcoholic, you're always alcoholic. I don't believe that at all. I was messed up emotionally and some people might not agree with me, but I don't think I'm messed up emotionally now. I'm a quite functional person. And I ran a business by the way. I started a program called Bearden Personal Service which was with the Army and Air Force Exchange, so I wound up with 103 employees in five states making name plates, name tapes, anything that had to do with identifying your equipment and so forth, signing rubber stamps and so forth, all over the United States and shipping stuff to all over the world to American troops, and that was very successful financially and I helped raise five children.

You have five children, you have a number of grandchildren.

Robert Bearden: I have about, I think I have 13 grandchildren I think and like three or four great grandchildren.

And you also wrote a book.

Robert Bearden: Yup, wrote a book and I'm writing two more. The second book – the first book of course is To D-Day and Back, and the second book is my experience at UT, which is From Stalag 3C to Doing UT, or How to Get a Four-Year Degree in Five. And my book about my experience with the drug addicts and alcoholics at Christian Farms Treehouse is going to be entitled Dear Mom, I'm Coming Home Sore.

When did you do To D-Day and Back? When did you write that book?

Robert Bearden: I wrote it over a period of about three years and wrote it probably mostly about, been thinking about it for years, but probably two or three years I started writing on it, and -

When was it published?

Robert Bearden: That's what?

When it was published?

Robert Bearden: It's been published September a year ago.

Oh, so it's a recent book.

Robert Bearden: Yeah, yeah, and it sold out first 4,000 copies the first month.

Wow, terrific. And you're how old, Mr. Bearden?

Robert Bearden: I'm 85 now.

Well you're certainly hanging in there, aren't you?

Robert Bearden: Yeah! I just went to Brownwood where they, the, where the National NCO Association gave some World War II veterans some medal, and I went there because a friend of ours was getting a medal and my wife and I went there to see that presentation, and they wound up I had more military combat experience than anybody there, and they insisted on giving me one of the medals, but it was kind of humorous and I, you know, I know, I know well that the real heroes are those white crosses, and as you can see in that book, when I go back, I visit my buddies and I go talk to 'em and it's very rewarding.

The buddies you left in France.

Robert Bearden: There's some great guys over there. One of my men is under there in my squad, my platoon sergeant, Chet Gunk is there, my first sergeant, George Pettis is there, and so a lot of great guys there, and what my whole, my big talks which is frequently was the theme of our talks is freedom is not free at all, very expensive.

It certainly is. We have to wrap this up.

Robert Bearden: Very good.

I hate to do it. You've been a fascinating subject to talk to. You've led a fascinating life.

Robert Bearden: Well I hope I've been helpful to you in what you're doing.

Oh, I'm sure that people will just enjoy thoroughly listening to your experiences and to you and what you've had to say because it's just unique experience compared to most of the interviews I've had. It's been an honor and a privilege to listen to you. I haven't hardly had to say anything. You've just went right along so well. It must that way you write books.

Robert Bearden: Yeah, I just, my agent editor said Bob is a good storyteller and he's got a lot of stories to tell.

That's a very good story and what's fascinating is they're true.

Robert Bearden: Yeah, well they're, really are, some I've said that nobody but paratroopers, ex-paratroopers could just about believe To D-Day and Back because some of those things, you know, in that book it talks about two guys firing an MG, an MG light machine gun down through the middle of a barracks in Alliance, Nebraska Air Base. Where in the world could you find crazy people, with people sleeping on both sides? So paratroopers had to be a different lot and they had to be to do what they did.

Well I have a couple of questions for you I'd like to ask you in closing out. First one would be and I know you could talk for hours about this, but I'm gonna make you hold it short, looking back, how do you think your military service affected your life?

Robert Bearden: It made me appreciate life. The first time I slept between two sheets was after I came into the Army. I was raised during the Depression. So last night when my wife brought home steaks and cooked 'em on the grill, I don't think I'd ever eaten a steak in my life before I went through the Army. It taught me discipline which I had never had. I was a real juvenile delinquent, and it took that all out of me completely.

OK. One final question I'm gonna ask. And it's for you to answer as you see fit. Is there anything else you would like to add so that future generations can have a full understanding of what your generation went through?

Robert Bearden: I would say I have been asked in France by mothers of children when we go back to Normandy and they come see us and see me in a jumpsuit, and they say holding their children, would you do it again, and the answer looking at those children is yes, we'd do it again for those children and the children here in the United States, and I would tell anybody coming on down the line that that was a very painful experience to go through getting shot and getting shot at and knowing you were about to die is a very awful experience, and it was done for you children who are coming on down the line in the year 2050, and I just hope you appreciate those guys under those white crosses because they paid a very expensive price. They were in their teens and in their 20's. They were not 40- and 50-year-old people, none of them. They were all teenagers and in their 20's, practically every one under those crosses. So just appreciate what they've done for you and appreciate the price of freedom.

OK Mr. Bearden, I really, really can't tell you how much I appreciate having spent this time with you. I wish it could've been triple the time and I hope sometime that I'll have an opportunity to get up to Belton.

Robert Bearden: Well I'd just love to have you anytime.

I'd love to stop by, say hello, and maybe buy you a beer and talk some more because your experience has obviously been fascinating and I'm sure there's so much more that's left to be talked about and maybe you'll write another book about some of that -

Robert Bearden: Look forward to it.

OK?

Robert Bearden: Bless you.

I loved talking to you sir, and best of luck to you and stay healthy.

Robert Bearden: Thank you, peace, bye bye.

[End of recording]