Transcription: James Smith

Today is February the 25th, 2010. My name is Mike McCreaken and I'm interviewing Mr. James T. Smith. This interview is taking place in person at his house located at 2534 Hollow Hook Road in Houston, Texas. The zip code is 77080. Mr. Hook, when were you born?

James Smith: February 22nd, 1930.

1930, OK.

James Smith: I just had a birthday.

That's right, you did, in fact this past Monday. We took a holiday off for you. Where were you born?

James Smith: I don't know.

OK. I believe it because it's kind of hard for a little baby infant to remember exactly where they were –

James Smith: I don't know, I was born around the Sedgewick Indian Reservation in Kansas. It's an area near Wichita now. I tried to trace my family back and the FBI gave me a security check several times and they didn't know and couldn't find anymore about it than I did, and the only record I have is when my first adopted father died October 1935, a World War I veteran in the 10th Mountain Division, I was adopted, listed in the Baptist church there in Valley Center, Kansas, a survivor's adopted son, and this is 1935, and I tried to run down some people that knew me, and I very well remember where the house was that we lived, and they lost the farm in the '35 Depression and the sickness. The best I could find out is that my adopted mother was a well regarded midwife, and in those days, I probably came from a family that couldn't support any kids or didn't want any and I was given to them for adoption. So anyway, to straighten out my being a legal citizen, the probate court in Shawnee County, Kansas, issued a birth certificate showing I was born in Kansas City, Missouri, and that was a fictitious birth certificate, but it satisfied the FBI. Then years ago, or later, it all came back again about five years ago when I applied for a passport to overseas travel. The U.S. immigration customs, the passport agency, told me then I was not a legal citizen, and they wouldn't issue any passports because I had no proof of being, an original birth certificate or anything like that. Well anyway after straightening things out about six months, I finally decided to give them this fictitious birth certificate issued by the state of Missouri for a birth in Kansas, and they took it. So I was adopted three times, raised in an orphanage.

What branch of service were you in?

James Smith: I was in the ____ 1st Armored Division, and they split us in the Senate, half of us to Korea, and I was transferred to the 2nd Infantry in Korea in 1951.

OK, so you joined in 1951. Tell me a little bit about your experiences in Korea. What did you do?

James Smith: I trained as a recon forward observer, and when I forgot the, got to Yokohama, Japan, and we were in Camp Drake waiting for the allocation for different units in Korea, why when nothing for the 2nd Division came up for about 10 days, and so several of us, we knew something was wrong. We were in the wrong MOS. They sent us to Korea as a forward observer infantry, forward observer on night patrols. Out of the forward observers probably 10 or 12 forward observers that were around different units there when I was there, probably only 3 of us that came home alive.

Did you enlist in the service or were you drafted?

James Smith: No, I was drafted. I went to school at Virginia Military Institute and was drafted in between the end of the semester there.

But you said only three of you came back?

James Smith: As far as I know there was three of us in our regiment there, one other one was from Kansas and one was from Iowa. I still hear from one in Iowa once in a while. He belongs to the 2nd Division association.

Tell me a little bit about your experiences in Korea.

James Smith: Well, we got broken in on heartbreak ridge, and the saying was if you keep your head and ass down for 30 days, you'll live. And it proved true. Most of our casualties were replacements who had been there, didn't make the full 30 days. And this wasn't always true, but kind of a saying within the infantry units was you make the first 30 days you got a better chance. And it was summer when I got there and it was hot and muggy and monsoon season, and real messy. The Chinese, we had 36 Chinese Army against us besides the North Korean unit, and they had orders I guess to annihilate the 2nd Division, which is pretty well known. 2nd Division got hit pretty hard and a lot of casualties, more than pretty much any unit over there, the Marine Division and the 2nd Division held together pretty good. I'm thankful I lived through it, but I would never try it again. And we did our catnapping in the day time and night patrols at night or on the outpost at night, and some of the firefights we got in, we had the Dutch unit with us, and anytime we came in from night patrol or a firefight out there, the Dutch would find out where we were and they'd go out and try to get a prisoner. We started to take some prisoners and it got our own people killed because they'd beat down our concertine or made holes where we were attacked, they were strong, they were smart. They kept track of us without us knowing it. We walked right into some ambushes which got some of us killed, but the Dutch would go out to try to bring in a prisoner dead or alive to bring back something, because at that time the U.S. government offered $300 for a live prisoner, and that got some of us killed so we learned that we didn't, the Dutch wanted to go ahead and try, they'd go right up there in the early morning sometimes right there and we'd come in to find out if they knew we'd left, had a prisoner or left anybody out there. They would go out and try to get them just for the fun.

So there was a bounty.

James Smith: There was a bounty on 'em. After General Boatner got a lot of us killed just because the enemy would hang up a GI uniform, fatigues, with the 2nd Division patch on it which was very obvious, it was a big black shield with a star Indian head in it, and on a night patrol maybe lose four or five people just to try to retrieve an empty uniform because they knew we would come after it and we finally quit that. General Boatner relieved each command in '51 I

think it was, and then we got General Fry, which was a World War II veteran, just like a second Patton – short, crippled, pearl-handled 44 guns and ___ cane, and the first time I ever saw him I'd been there about three weeks. And I'd salute him in the trench, and he stopped me and said soldier, where are you from? I said Kansas. And he said what's your MOS? I told him. He said don't you ever salute an officer up here again. You'll get us all killed. And he remembered me for gosh, the rest of the time I was over there. I was a forward observer. He always called me over somebody. I didn't have any idea what the password was or anything and they didn't care. They recognized my voice and he remembered a couple of us.

Your voice is distinctive, it really is.

James Smith: He'd call, he'd get on the comm old phone over there, what's going on up in front it was like that boy, I remember it was Clyde Meter. He knew both of us.

How long did you serve under General Fry?

James Smith: I think it was about 10 months. We collected points every month that we were under combat, and we had to have 40 to 42 points to rotate, and all the time I was over there, we had combat every month we were over there, even with going in the reserve. At Tojio Island they would guard prisoners and that's when we were ordered to go over. They had brights in the prison camp and we were ordered in there behind tanks to start shooting and we actually, we'd head across. We killed prisoners.

They were rioting, so you were doing crowd control.

James Smith: Right, but that still wasn't right. I mean they would throw rocks, but here we were behind tanks and with Browning automatics and all this and just a lot of guys, it just didn't, didn't take it __, then what happened, they'd send us back to the front line after that. But 2nd Division just had a bad reputation of blood and guts outfit and no prisoners. But it was just by accident or coincidence, I ended up in the same division and a regimental combat team, my dad, one of my adopted fathers, the last one, served in World War I, and it was the 2nd Division which is a part Marine division, part Army.

So you had two World War I adopted dads.

James Smith: One was 10th Mountain Division, the other one was 2nd Infantry, World War I. then we got over on Baldy and it was old bloody Baldy. I think between the 2nd Division and the 45th Division there it got taken 74 or 5 times that they were gonna have the TET offense and take Seoul, and we were, all stood between the North Koreans and Seoul.

How long were you on Baldy?

James Smith: Oh Baldy was probably, I mean at least a couple of months on Baldy, and it was one of the further north points on what turned out to be the MLR later. We were up on the 39th parallel line, came home, and that's as far north as where they settled it was the MLR. That's when they put the 1st Marine Division, the 2nd Infantry Division together, and they held it, western coast, and towards Seoul. It was, I don't know, it was hard to see the guys. A lot of us I think it's what, why a lot of us feel the way we do today. We still have nightmares and it still bothers us. I go to these sessions with the VA for help like that, and in our group there's about, I think there's 12 of us, and all but 2 were 2nd Division in Korea, combat veterans.

So it was a pretty tough one.

James Smith: But the way a lot of them feel, after you see some of your buddies get killed, and any friend you lose your friends, you just don't get close to anybody anymore. I know I was, I've been diagnosed that way as a loner, and I know it was hard on my kids.

How many children do you have?

James Smith: Six – four boys and two girls. One of them, we have a nephew that's in Iraq now, and my other, my one son, he was in the service a long time ago.

Are the sessions at VA, are they helping you out?

James Smith: Oh, when we got out in '53, first part of '53, the armistice hadn't been signed yet, and the VA wasn't much then, or they didn't want us, so we ended up getting, finally got a job and they said well, do you have a job, and we don't need you. I never went to the VA for gosh, 40 years. Then I did get my education through the VA, which made a lot of difference. The last 10 years, why the VA's been a lot of help.

That's good. It's just a shame it's taken so many years before you get that help.

James Smith: I had severe frost bite in my legs and hips, and oh I probably had disability for it along with a wound, and it's helped a lot, just the medical attention, it made a lot of difference.

Medical attention is one thing but it's that talking things out is very important, too.

James Smith: Just the last three years that they started that for the Korean veterans more or less.

The past three years?

James Smith: Yeah, that's when first they sent out, three years. We kind of enjoy getting to see each other, even though none of us knew each other overseas. We were in the same outfit, different units.

You say there's about a dozen of you in the group?

James Smith: About a dozen of us.

And ten of them are from the 2nd Division. Did they have the same kinds of, did they do the same thing you did?

James Smith: None of them were forward observers. There was one was a combat medic that has taken things real hard. He saw quite a bit of bloody work, and all of us did, but he's kind of one. Then another one, he lives up near Conroe, he's just pretty bitter about everything still. Like I say, everybody there has had, gosh, I think everybody there is pretty much, not everybody, but some Purple Heart or Bronze Star, something like that. But some are taking it pretty good, but for all, we're all getting up to where we're retired now and we're all but a couple of them are living pretty decent, all right, but it's where we, you know, you get older and you end up more

time to reflect on a lot of things. One good experience I had over there was on Arrowhead Ridge. Our French battalion was holding it, and we were doing the night patrol, but there was about 75 French men that were supposed to be holding it, and they had I think it was around Thanksgiving one time, with a French unit, they sent up some five-gallon cans of French made wine and bread – first time it ever happened over there in a long time. It came from the division over there somewhere, and we had orders not to drink any though. It was a good thing we didn't because they were all dead that night.

All the French.

James Smith: All of them, they lost oh I guess something like 60 of them all dead, and then the Chinese hit us, right beside them. We had to retreat some and then got it back, but that was as much as we hated it -

So that was on Arrowhead Ridge.

James Smith: It was Arrowhead Ridge, and that was Dagmar was the big mountains, was looking right down on top of it, and President Eisenhower's son, Major John Eisenhower – everybody called him Major John – he was a G2 officer, served for the 3rd Division that was backing us up. After that bit over with, why Eisenhower came in, he was elected president, but that's when he made a trip over there to visit before he became president, and he went to see his son of course, but he seen down on our ridge there that we had taken over from the French, and here came General Fry and Eisenhower. You couldn't miss them from the distance hardly. And another colonel kind of hobbling down, kind of fairly shallow trench and just before dark, got out to our bunker, and I got to shake hands with him and he spent about 15 minutes talking to us.

Is that right?

James Smith: He was one about our fire direction for area for the night patrol and all this, and we showed him, and we had one of the Army topo general maps, and on top of it I had taken some plastic from the combo batteries. We had those 52-pound radios that had the big batteries in them. Take the plastic and put it over there and work on that plastic. Some of them cordless. He said you take this on night patrol? I said yes. It's to call in fire right on top of ourselves. That was the only thing that saved us. We got ambushed, you'd call in mortar fire or artillery right in on top of you.

So General Eisenhower didn't realize -

James Smith: He looked at that and he says what do you do with this if you get captured? I said, I eat it. He looked at me, he said that was a good idea. But he was, General Eisenhower, after he became president, why we started getting better artillery support. Under Truman we got cut to three rounds per day per gun, of artillery or mortar, just enough to keep zeroed in. After he was over there, of course I imagine to protect the troops, we started getting more ammunition to fire and hold on.

Were you surprised to see the general?

James Smith: Yeah, I sure was, the general.

He heard you -

James Smith: I know the reason he picked our area, because a long ridge went out to kind of a valley both sides, open valley, and of course his 7th Division right behind us for backup, so that was the place he wanted to see. We were on that ridge about a month or so, and then there was a big massacre in Death Valley. We got attacked one night, let's see, that was before Arrowhead, we got attacked one night and the next day they estimated something like 900 dead bodies out there in front of us in the Death Valley.

That was below Arrowhead Ridge.

James Smith: Right. So yeah, that was one of the better memories.

That's a good one.

James Smith: Yeah.

I don't know if this is the right term to use, but how many different battles were you in? The names I know, Heartbreak Ridge and Bloody Baldy, Arrowhead is new to me –

James Smith: Dagmar, Arrowhead. Let's see, there was Heartbreak, kind of the edge, Pork Chop, and then we hit Old Baldy, and one they called Death Valley which was just I guess trying to stabilize the MLR then, and Arrowhead. When I left, we were, part of that was what they called the Iron Train little area in there, some of those. I don't know, we had a unit citation, presidential unit citation with two clusters, and these were for a couple of the offensives. I don't know what the names were. We were supposed to, midnight Charlie was always telling us overnight, just puttering along and dropping, we learned that they were going to annihilate us and take Seoul by Christmas, which they tried pretty hard.

Yeah, but they never did. You held them.

James Smith: They'd done it before, but that last two times they didn't get past us.

How long were you in Korea?

James Smith: I would say 10 and a half months, something like that. I think as little as 10 and a half months, the actual combat part.

And in that 10 and a half months, you were in four or five different battles?

James Smith: Yeah. This was really for, this is what they had for their, we heard that later what they said were two of those were supposed to have gotten Bronze Stars for and we never did see, never had been presented any awards. We got home, we got quarantined in San Francisco Bay because two or three of the combat veterans, one of the ships we came home on was General Nelson Walker, had 2709 caskets and 1700 live troops with some nurses.

On board that ship?

James Smith: On board. That was the casket ship, and we got quarantined in San Francisco Bay off Alcatraz, and that lasted, supposed to have been three weeks and I think a little less than that that we were there. Guys jumped overboard on that thing and tried to swim to Alcatraz or

something, and the patrol boats would just pick 'em up and put 'em back on ship because the guys would have died of spinal meningitis waiting for their, had us quarantined, see if anybody else came down with something bad. Then after they processed us, from there on a troop train to Fort Sill, Oklahoma, which five or six cars of troop train soldiers only under guard, and still under quarantine. We got to Fort Sill for another two or three weeks, and feed us pills and all that, and then they started discharging us, or released us from active duty.

And the only physical wound you had was you said you were wounded – where were you wounded?

James Smith: Oh, I had shrapnel that cut right down across here. I had 100 and – oh I had plastic surgery done later, and the plastic surgeon done just like a zipper, right inside there, 175 stitches.

On your cheek?

James Smith: Yeah, from here and down inside.

I wouldn't believe it. But I'm not a doctor.

James Smith: The doctor that did it was a big, he was Dr. Robinson, he was a big, had big hands, oh, 6-foot, or so like that, called him Big Guy, and he used a little fish hook that they did the stitching. That's what the nurse said. It's been a miracle the way he does things. Nobody could ever see how he did it with the big hands and all that.

That would've been done at one of the field hospitals?

James Smith: That was done in the University of Kansas Medical Center. It's when they were first doing plastic surgery and he was learning from a Chinese doctor at that time, and I was used as a guinea pig. Everybody was up there watching it.

You really were a pioneer then.

James Smith: I went back oh, six or seven times I guess. They would buff it out and restitch it.

Wow. When you got released at Fort Sill, where did you go from there?

James Smith: I had my uncle in Oklahoma City, he picked me up and bought me a suit. I remember that. I stayed there with him a couple of days. He was an attorney there in Oklahoma City. He was my adopted uncle. He took me back home up into Kansas over up there. I had another uncle there that helped me get started and try to find a job, and luckily I had a cousin, a World War II veteran that he had a job with GE, General Electric, at Strother Field there, aircraft maintenance field for Boeing, and he said well, he'd talked to Cantrell, the guy that's the head of the plant, and so the three of us got out right there in the same area together went there and they hired all three of us. They were both veterans, World War II veterans. We didn't have any friends. We were in the GE's aircraft turban division training and like that, and it was a good job then. It took us about a month to find it, but anyway -

So you worked for Boeing.

James Smith: I worked for GE and Boeing then for oh, I think it was about three years. And I took a leave of absence, educational leave from them to go back to college to the University of Kansas. I didn't, they were going to send me to electrical engineering school in Columbus Ohio, University of Cincinnati, and I was leery, and of course I was still scarred and everything, but I was really just unsettled. Instead of going, they were going to pay the education where you worked during the day and go to night school, and it takes you about five or six years to get an electrical engineering degree. I decided I wasn't that good in math or I hadn't tried it really, and I had always like, eventually I decided to take an educational leave, and whenever you get your degree, come back. Said whatever you do, that little piece of paper will make a lot of difference. So I did, took the educational leave and my GI and working part time. Why I got a degree in geological engineering.

Well it's not electrical engineering, but it is engineering. That is something.

James Smith: I did all right, strung my GI Bill out at three quarter pay, and then I had enough to, I had good grades and things, and I got a scholar at Garvey Company drilling scholarship for a masters degree with my GI. That's at Kansas State University.

So you got a masters in geology, geological engineering.

James Smith: It was mainly hydrogeology. It was a field that really wasn't started yet, but it was in dam construction and power plant construction, little hydroelectric plants.

Who did you work for?

James Smith: I worked for, after I got out of school I worked for an oil company that offered me the best job and that lasted about the first year, and then they had their downturn and so I went to work for the U.S. Geological Survey out in Denver, the Department of Interior. And I stayed with them and the International Boundary and Water Commission out of Juarez, Mexico, and El Paso. It was under the U.S. State Department, and overseeing the construction of some international reservoirs, like Falcon, Amistad Dam, and some in Mexico, a bunch of them. It was Division of Water was ownership between the U.S. and Mexico, and there was water rights, legal suits from 1960 clear up into '73 or '74. But anyway, between the two I had 29 years in with them, and then I retired from that and went to work for Bechtel Corporation, same kind of work, only a lot better pay. I should've tried that earlier. Anyway I had something like 7 years in with Bechtel Corporation. And this was working on nuclear sites.

On nuclear sites.

James Smith: Right.

Did you work on the site down in Matagorda, Bay City?

James Smith: No, but that was when I did, I worked on one over in Crosby, and the Entergy up in Arkansas and Mississippi, and I worked on hazmat sites, and the hazmat site for General Electric in Puerto Rico, and another oil company hazmat site in Tulera, Peru, and worked on a site up in, a couple of them in Canada.

So you worked all around.

James Smith: I had to move. The regional office was here, so they just come to the regional office and you just work out of there. This was called home but I was out, and they treated us good. I got good pay and if I was going to be gone more than they figured over a month or so, they would let your wife go with you, and it didn't cost any more to send the wife with you than it did to keep you out there. They would rather have you on the job with your wife, same motel bill, all the same bill, rather than sending you home every week.

It made for a lot happier worker.

James Smith: Sure it was. Yeah, I enjoyed it. I enjoyed the whole career. It was interesting, very interesting work, the dynamics of these large dams.

What was the responsibility you had as a geological engineer?

James Smith: I was in charge of the safety of dams for a nationwide program, the agencies that have dams have to keep track of the dynamics of the dams and hope something doesn't go wrong and we lose one. I was lucky enough all the dams I'd worked on, we caught things. They have to seep and move so much. You never know some of them, but they move in millimeters back and forth, some seasonal and the way the volume is behind them, there's a lot of pressure behind those dams, and this is what we had to keep track of every week. Inspections twice a week down at the bottom of the dams. Amistad was 256 feet below the surface and you're down there checking the seepage and the cracks, stress or anything like this. That was the biggest dam I'd worked on was Amistad, up in Del Rio. I lived out there for a while.

Would you have anything else you'd like to add that we didn't talk about?

James Smith: Oh, no other than, no it was just, I tell you I was scared every day I was over there. That's kind of the way all of us feel. You were scared to take a nap, and every time you heard something, well you got to where you was jumpy, and we were scared and we had to depend on each other for to hold our own. I'm just thankful that I lived through it and it was an experience that you never forget. I know we're losing 1,000 or so World War II veterans every month, and we're losing a lot of Korean veterans, too. I'm active in the VFW post here, and have been, the VFW 50th membership anniversary was about three years ago, and held different offices in the VFW. Now most of them coming in are the ones from Afghanistan and your Desert Storm. But the Vietnam veterans and the Korean veterans are starting to, it's starting to make end roads on them because just in the last three years we've lost over 100 of the guys that I knew when I first came here, and one year we lost 52 of them, and all in one year. Of course we have about 1,000 members.

That's one a week.

James Smith: That's the largest post in Houston over there on Foley and -

Is that 57 –

James Smith: 8790.

8790 – I was going to say 5790.

James Smith: Yeah, 8790.

Your post a year ago let us have a benefit seminar.

James Smith: Usually every year they have -

We had a good turnout.

James Smith: But there's, I'm surprised, I had more I guess more attention with, well for some of them in the veterans offices over there took advantage of it, and to look at the benefits and helping guys getting them. One of my jobs there was to keep our post informed what's available to them. I'm surprised how many veterans didn't have any idea what they could qualify for or never tried. Now the ones that were disabled, most of them did, but the regular veterans that had some disabilities, most of them never applied for a lot of things.

It's good they had a guy like you to act as a service officer for them and kind of get through that mess of paper.

James Smith: Yeah, the veterans benefits as far as a lot of the non-combat veterans, you don't qualify for a lot of things, but I'm glad most of the veterans were glad that they can get help from the VA when they have to. In 1953, the VA wasn't much, but I'd say the last 10 years the VA has done a whole lot better.

I agree with you. The last 10 years have been really, it's meant something to men and women that served where it was not always, didn't always seem to be there for you.

James Smith: Yeah. Oh, one other thing. When I got out of combat, they sent us, the ones that were rotating, we went through Sasabo, Japan, on the far south tip of the islands, and when we got there they stripped you down naked, and wade through a disinfectant pool, and this was in the winter time, too. We got in this one barracks, there was a pool like that and the doctor setting over there watching your tracks through the pool, and then he would hand you a towel and go next door to get some clothes across that place, in freezing weather. But anyway, it was funny, the doctor, he looked at me, I walked across there and he said turn around and come back and do that again, and I walked around and leave the wet prints, and he said you're the flattest footed fool I've ever seen. He says were you that way before you came in combat? I said I've always been that way. When they needed replacements, they didn't care whether you were physically able, as long as you had the training and all that, and we didn't know any better, but found out later this was the only surviving son, and there was a bunch of other catches, and you just go to service, but you don't have to serve in combat for some of those because you're not supposed to be able to hold it, but it didn't make any difference because I know there was a couple of us boys flat footed, and they said that's the Indian blood in you, flat footed. But we came home on the ship, the Nelson M. Walker, and with all the caskets that had to be checked every day down in the hull of the ship. They would send a detail down to fray 'em, and shifted and all that, and it smelled, and that was a bad detail. But everybody, we had some bad weather but we had some days that were nice, and the whole deck of that ship, everybody was up on deck, with a sleeping bag or whatever we had, because you try to even sleep out there at night, but they tried to discourage, we had to stay around the fantail because some parts there, afraid you would get knocked overseas if we were rolling too much. One time three days we never got on deck at all because they hit a storm off the north of one of them islands some place up in the north Pacific. But anyway that was guys sleeping on the fantail, and it was the quietest, darkest nights coming home I think I've ever seen. That and the night we landed in Inchon, when we first landed at

Inchon in ’51, they couldn’t have picked a darker, blacker night. The landing craft, the end would go down, they would hit something and thought, they hit, so down went the, and out we went, and that water was way over our head and we lost quite a few guys just drowned before they ever got to shore because it was shipwrecked or something in the Inchon harbor there. But we left coming back through Inchon to go to Sasabo, why gosh, they had a pier all built out there and right out to walk on the ship almost. It wasn’t anything at all like it was when we first got there. I remember those were probably some of the darkest, that ship could darn near hear a clock, it was just the turn of the screws on it, and very little talking or anything. It was a very quiet ship.

Glad to get out of there and get headed home.

James Smith: Yeah.

Well, I really thank you for your time that you’ve spent with me. I know it’s been tough on you and I just appreciate you and your service. On behalf of Commissioner Jerry Patterson and myself, thank you and God bless you.

James Smith: Well thank you, you too.

[End of recording]