

R. Ben Benson
Narrator

Michael Moad [?]
Interviewer

January 26, 2011

R. Ben Benson **BB**
Michael Moad **MM**
Unidentified teacher **UT**

Note: The interview location was not indicated; however, it apparently took place at a high school in or near Utica, New York.

MM: This is January 26, 2011. I'm Michael Moad [?]. I am interviewing--what is your name, please?

BB: Ben Benson.

MM: When and where were you born?

BB: I was born in 1932, June 8, in New York City.

MM: What education did you have before the war?

BB: That's a good question. Before the war, I just had high school. I went to college and got my masters after my service.

MM: Did you have a job before the war?

BB: Yes, I did. The group of people like myself were known as “jailbait,” meaning we were draft bait in the sense that we were like prisoners waiting to go to war. That’s why I use the word jailbait. No major company wanted to hire you, because they knew in a year or two, you’d be drafted, and they weren’t going to train you for the company. So as a result, friends of mine and I got jobs in, like, an auto body shop, and I worked in a gas station for a couple of years – a year and a half – before I got drafted.

MM: Did you enlist or were you drafted?

BB: I was drafted.

MM: When did you enter?

BB: Good question. It would be in, I think it was March 1952, and I served for two years, until 1954.

MM: What was your branch of service?

BB: I was in the US Army, 7th Infantry Division.

MM: Where did you receive basic training?

BB: Fort Lee, Virginia.

MM: Were there any experiences you’d like to share? Did anything happen? What was the training like?

BB: Well, the basic training – you’ve heard the terminology, basic training? It’s exactly what it is. You’re taken from a raw recruit, and you meet others who are recruits from all over the country. It’s rather like going into a cold shower, because you’re not prepared for this. It’s a toughening up process, I would say.

MM: What were your dates of service?

BB: 1952 to 1954.

MM: What was your specific training?

BB: My specific training was – and I didn't volunteer for this – was graves registration service. Now, what that is in a nutshell, you were trained, after I finished basic training – and how I got into this branch, I don't know – most of the fellow students, their dads or their family were funeral directors or mortuary.... In the training, we had to learn every human bone in the body, and we actually went to hospitals and hospital morgues and viewed remains. It sounds rather ghastly, and it was. I have to be honest with you, I wasn't geared toward that kind of situation. I had a weak stomach. But that cleared up quickly. You had no choice.

MM: What was your unit's assignment?

BB: You mean when I got overseas?

MM: Yes.

BB: When I got overseas – this is during the wartime – I was with the 7th Infantry Division, which was Army. I should have brought a patch with me – it was an hourglass insignia patch, shaped like an hourglass, black against a red background. So I was assigned – I don't know if you've heard in your history books of the 38th Parallel in Korea? Well, your teacher may have heard of it. Well, our station was approximately a mile from the front line.

MM: So you were pretty close...

BB: Yeah. We were in what they called "war theater," per se, because that was the general area of the fighting.

MM: What battles were you in?

BB: I wasn't in any battles, thank goodness. But our job, mainly, and I will not – certainly I'm open to questions, but I'll try to make it as pleasant as possible. Our job, when soldiers were killed, our job was to identify them and process them. Process them, meaning identification if possible, and then they were shipped to a MASH unit, which was a hospital unit south of us. So our initial job was to identify these soldiers that were killed in action, and if necessary, to go to the front line to retrieve them if that were the case.

MM: Did you receive any medals?

BB: Yeah, I got a few, but don't ask me... I gave them all to my grandchildren. I think there's eight of them.

MM: How did you feel about combat?

BB: I think that's a fair question. I wouldn't say I was a coward, but I wasn't exactly volunteering or chomping at the bit for it. I'll answer by saying this. After a while, you become immune to it. To say you're scared – to say you weren't, I'd be lying – but after a while you don't think about that because you have a job to do. We never knew how long a day or how short it was going to be because it was constant on the go. Have you ever seen a John Wayne movie?

MM: No.

BB: Gee, I'm really dating myself!

UT: He has heard of John Wayne, because his teacher's talked about John Wayne. (Laughter)

MM: Well, John Wayne is a movie character, of course, and his Army pictures were propaganda, of course. He had bandoliers of bullets on his chest, and pearl handled .45. So I was in this position about two weeks, or a week and a half – not even that. I went to the company commander, who was a Lieutenant Colonel, West Point graduate. He didn't look like he was – he needed a shave.... And I

said “I want out. I can’t take this duty anymore.” And he told me – not in polite terms – what I could do with my duty. Needless to say, I went back on duty, right? But after a while, you became very respected for doing what we had to do. Somebody had to do it, so you looked at it from that point of view.

MM: How did you keep in touch with your family and friends?

BB: In those days, we did not have CDs. We wrote back and forth letters. I will tell you, mail call was one of the most important parts of the day. That’s what you looked forward to, letters from your girlfriend or parents or friends or whatever. It was how you kept in communication.

MM: What were the food and supplies like?

BB: Well, believe it or not, in basic training, and sometimes when you were on line duty--in other words, when you couldn’t get back to a mess hall--you had C rations, which were canned goods, or canned biscuits (which I thought were from World War I). But most of the time we had a mess hall, and the food was fresh food, considering. It wasn’t gourmet, but it was pretty good.

MM: How about the supplies, what supplies would you get every day, like weapons...?

BB: Well, you were always issued a standard weapon. In my case, it was an M1 rifle, and after that it was an M30, plus I had what we called a sidearm, which was a .45. I really didn’t need it... Once you were issued them, unless it malfunctioned, there was no reason why you would change it; you kept that indefinitely. A number was assigned, a serial number, and you were responsible for cleaning that weapon and keeping it in good shape.

MM: What was your most memorable experience?

BB: My most memorable experience was after the war. I was assigned – you’ve heard of the United Nations?

MM: Yes.

BB: I was assigned to a United Nations group, and what our job was, we called S&R, Search and Recovery. Our job was to search for those soldiers that were killed – could have been days or months earlier – and were never found. They could have been in caves, or river beds.... I was assigned to work with Turkish, British, and French. It was a very good group. It wasn’t fun, but it was enjoyable in the sense that we were all in it together, and we met new people. And this was my first experience with people from other nations on a direct basis.

MM: How do you feel about your military experiences?

BB: Well, let me give you an answer to that that’s universal. It goes back to World War I. I didn’t invent it – I wish I did. “I wouldn’t buy it for a penny, I wouldn’t sell it for a million.” The experience matures you real fast. Some people, you’ve heard no matter what war theater they were in – it could have been Vietnam, it could have been Korea, it could have been World War II or World War I – they are traumatized – you’ve heard the word shellshocked? – meaning a mental aberration or a mental situation and they never get over it. For instance, they are afraid to communicate and if they do they don’t communicate well. Fortunately, most of the people I was involved with didn’t get that kind of experience.

MM: Is there anything else people should know about your experiences in Korea?

BB: No, other than to say there were many like us, and I don’t think I did any more or less than anyone at the time.

MM: What did you do when you arrived home?

BB: The first thing I did was have an ice cream sundae. You've got to remember, I was there almost two years, nineteen months to be exact. I couldn't remember what it was to get an ice cream soda or an apple pie. Let me give you an example, if I may digress. After the war, we went to the capital, Seoul. It was all bombed out and now it's rebuilt. I was with a friend of mine, and there was a farmer selling apples by the roadside, and I hadn't seen an apple in a year and a half. So my friend said, "Don't buy it, don't take it!" And I said, "Why?" He said, "You don't know if it's been contaminated or what." Well, I had to have an apple, but I took it back to base and I scrubbed that thing, and washed it, and ate it. Then I had the worst case of dysentery for three days. Because they didn't wash things; their sanitary conditions, if you and I looked at it today, it would be appalling, but that was their lifestyle.

MM: Did you get an education after the war?

BB: Yes. Let me tell you... It's a good question, and I want to answer it directly. When I was in basic training, there was a group of maybe only four or five college graduates in our barracks, and they stood out, meaning there was something about... not because they were taller or bigger than any of us – they weren't. And they didn't dress any better than us, just the same in regular fatigues. But there was something about them. I got talking to them, and I just got keyed in somehow. Being in the service, we had what they called the GI Bill, which paid for more than half of my college, and the other half I worked my way through. That was certainly worthwhile. So I went to college after I came back from the service.

MM: What college did you go to?

BB: I went to a small liberal arts college called Westminster. It's in Pennsylvania, between Pittsburgh and Youngstown, Ohio, right on the Ohio border. And I've taken a masters at Columbia University.

MM: What was your job after the war?

BB: Well, I had several jobs, like most people. But I went to college first, and then I was finding myself.... See, you're not the only ones who've got to find yourselves! But I ended up, career-wise, in purchasing. The last company I worked for, twenty years, was a Swiss company, I was their Director of Purchases, which was interesting because I went to Europe a few times and I traveled all over the United States.

MM: Do you belong to any veterans' organizations?

BB: No, I do not. I didn't want to be abrupt about that, and I guess they're fine organizations. But I'm the type of person that did my schtick, so to speak, and that was fine, but I don't want to keep reliving it. I'm not saying it's a bad thing – it might be a good thing – but it's not for me.

MM: How did your military experience affect your life?

BB: Well, I think it affected it in the sense that it got me more organized, and it matured me real fast. I looked at things a little differently after I went home. As I said before, it was an experience that I wouldn't want to volunteer for, but having said that and having gone through it, I think the experience is good only because it made you regimented, it made you learn how to live with other people in all kinds of conditions. So it does prepare you for life, for instance.

I'll tell you, I found being a Boy Scout was the greatest thing... In basic training, we were assigned what we called a two-man pup tent. A pup tent is a little tent that you have to put up. Well, got a course in how to erect a pup tent in about five seconds from this drill sergeant. To make a long story short, I was teamed up with a guy from Tennessee, I mean a hillbilly. He said, "I know how to put it up," and I said fine. Well, it was falling all over the place. And I said, "Do me a favor and just get out of the way and let me do it." From my scouting experience, I learned how to erect a tent and dig an irrigation ditch around it. It poured all night, and we were

probably the only two guys that were dry the next day. So being a Boy Scout was a great experience. It helped me out quite a bit.

MM: [To another student] Is there anything else?

Second student: Did you ever register... what's that term, after the service, Army Reserves? Were you on reserve?

BB: On reserve, no. I was asked to go. Keep in mind at that point after you haven't seen the United States in nineteen months, and you've been in all these... you just want out. I mean, I wanted out of the service. But at that point, to induce you... and first of all it wasn't reserves, they wanted you to hook up for another two or three or four years. I said absolutely not. "Yeah, but we'll pay you a bonus..." I think it was \$2,000; in those days—you're talking about fifty years ago--that was an awful lot of money. It's still a lot of money. And they said, "Well, if you won't take that, we'll send you to officers' training school, and you could make this, and do that." And I said no, I wanted out, and I did. So going through that routine, some friends of mine went to Reserves, but I did not, and I'm not sorry. There's nothing wrong with Reserves, it's just not for me.

UT: Well you served your time and you did a great job, and that's what is important.

BB: Well, it is, but of course from the Armed Services point of view, they want to keep you in as long as they can. I mean you're fresh meat, as far as they're concerned. And they get bonus points if they can get you to re-up, or reenlist. But I think the majority of us going through that experience just wanted out.

UT: You saw a very tough part of this; it's not a very pleasant...

BB: Well, yeah, it was growing up very fast. It was too fast.

UT: So listening to what you said, reading what you wrote, you were basically a mortician, then?

BB: Not in a complete sense, because a mortician (we had to study that too), would prepare remains and so forth. And we did not. Our primary job was to identify, and we used formaldehyde, which is a preservative. What we did, for instance for fingerprints, we always shot formaldehyde and made sure the fingerprints, as best we could, were preserved.

UT: So if they didn't have their dogtags on, like if their dogtags came off, or whatever, how would you go about identifying them?

BB: My job was, the first thing you did was take prints if there were prints available. Sometimes there weren't. But if there were, every enlisted man or draftee or armed service personnel, has a record, what they call a DOD. It's duplicated, and the Veterans' Administration has it. Even to this day, if you had a grandfather and you wanted to trace him, and you have his name but that's all you have, you don't have his records, most likely if you give them the years he served, they could trace him. Same with fingerprints, when you first come in the service, you're fingerprinted. And those are part of what they call a record jacket. So if this person or persons come in and you couldn't identify them through [unclear] or tags, when I wrote a report to my sergeant at the time (and I eventually replaced him), your job was to report where was he found--we had to take a map course – what grid coordinate was he found, what unit was he attached to. You could backtrack and say he was attached to the signal corps, infantry, or he's on special assignment.

UT: So, detective work?

BB: Yeah, if you look at it that way. And I will tell you, not to be gruesome, it was maybe a couple months before I was going to go home. It was 2:00 in the morning and this lieutenant woke me – and I was sound asleep – and he said “Come with me, we're going to the autopsy tent.” I said, “What for? You don't need me for that.” And to make a long story short, the person who was supposed to identify the remains and take – you had the surgeon who was giving dictation –

you always had a backup, what they called a scribe, in case the machine went off, so you'd always have a record. So that particular person wasn't available, so I was drafted, literally, to witness. And I never witnessed an autopsy in my life. And I felt, "Oh my God, this is going to be awful!" I won't tell you what the procedure was, other than it was a young doctor, and he spoke very slowly, and he was always very patient, "Did you hear what I said" and so forth. He said "Since this is your first time, let me explain what we're doing. This particular person came in and we believe it's a suicide, it was recorded as a suicide, but we can't accept that, we need to do an immediate autopsy to verify that." Well, it turned out—and it really gets interesting—this soldier who was killed, his father was a US Congressman, and when he heard that, he said "My son would never commit suicide. My son was killed in battle." Forget the war was over. "Or it was an accident, it was certainly not...." And this Congressman flew over. I didn't know that. He was in the tent, and I didn't know that; they didn't tell me that. So this doctor, when he was doing the autopsy process, said "I want to show you the slant of this bullet." And he took a string, and I said "What are you doing?" He said, "I want you to look at that." After a while, I could (keep in mind I had now a year and a half experience with that). He said "The angle of that bullet -it was a .45— could not have been self-inflicted." I don't know how he came up with what he did; and it **was** self-inflicted. In other words, he had committed suicide. And his father, who was naturally very upset, but his upset, which I thought was very shallow.... was more concerned—he didn't seem to care or want to know why his son would commit suicide—"Not my son, he couldn't have done that; somebody had to have shot him or it was an accident" or whatever. So that was interesting.

UT: That is very interesting. There was a part that you wrote about, too, that you accompanied the remains home.

BB: Yeah, I did. And I was offered to re-up that duty, and I said no, I didn't want to do that. Keep in mind that I just wanted out. I wanted to get back to civilian life and I didn't want any more part of it.

UT: I think that accompanying remains home could be very draining.

BB: It could be, but it's a wonderful thing if you could assure the parents or the loved ones that he—or she, I never did see a female—was given the best possible situation and respect, and so forth. But you're right, it takes a certain... but I didn't want to do that. It isn't that... I thought I could do it, I just wanted out.

UT: You said that after you identified the bodies, they went to a MASH unit. Were you close to a MASH unit?

BB: I would say maybe three or four miles. And then they were shipped to Japan, and then flown to the states.

UT: So when you watched the tv show "MASH," or the movie "MASH," were there any similarities? Did they do a pretty good job of that?

BB: Well, yes and no. I think they tried--as much as they kidded around--the actual work was very accurate. I don't think—in a MASH you didn't see that kind of clowning around, a guy dressed in women's clothes... But their procedures, I think they went by the book pretty well. That was very well done, as a matter of fact.

UT: That's good. Now how about your leave time?

BB: When you were in combat service for a certain time, you got what were called points, and you could apply to go to Japan. It was called R&R, rest and recovery. More like rest and drinking. Anyway, it was a neat thing. Because when you landed in Tokyo at the base, you went to a mess hall, and each person got a steak dinner, baked potatoes, and as much as you wanted. You could take three steaks if you wanted. So that was neat. And then you had a week you were on your own, you could do whatever you wanted. It was a lot of fun; it was worth it.

UT: So you got to see a lot of Japan, then?

BB: Oh yeah. I went to Hong Kong once, too. So it was good.

UT: That is a good experience. We just got done talking about World War I, and that's one of the things I talked about in class, the fact that a lot of young men enlisted because it was an experience. They wouldn't normally get to see Europe.

BB: Well, if they could do it without the threat of being killed, it would be all right. On the other hand, I will say this, you bring up a good point, and I think it was a good thing, because people like myself, I could have never gone to college because my parents couldn't afford to send me, which is one of those things. So the GI Bill, which paid half, and people like myself, we worked the other half to pay for it—we couldn't have done that without the service. So that was very beneficial.

UT: One of the things I was thinking about, too, you said you'd have to go out to the battlefield sometimes to retrieve the bodies. I take it the battlefield was still at that point, as opposed to fighting going on.

BB: Yeah, it was.

UT: So you never had to worry....

BB: If your question is, did we ever come under fire? Yes and no. Not on the battlefield, but our own section was shelled, and you dug holes and trenches; that was where you went. That only happened a couple of times.

UT: What about being involved with the Korean culture at all?

BB: Korean culture was a completely different culture than ours. I don't know if any of your fellow students at this school, if you ever have an Oriental student? Just to learn the language, you'd have to

be brilliant! At one time, I could tell a North Korean, a South Korean, a Chinese and a Japanese in Korea. My job was to study facial... I probably could do it after training. But the question was the culture. Keep in mind that South Korea was--now it's a very rich culture -- but if you go back fifty-seven years ago, they were a very poor country. People your age, if they were lucky they got to school. Most of them never went past the fifth grade. Those that did, of course, wanted to go to the United States. That was the land of milk and honey, with golden streets, to them. And a lot of them did, and did very well. But it was a different type of person, makeup-wise. Their idea (I'm not trying to give you a lecture, although I do teach), is, even--and you'll see it in the Middle East--the value of life is not what you and I would put on. I mean, they want to continue to go on living -- they do. But if their neighbors are killed or their family is killed, that's a terrible thing, but they accept it. That's the way it is. Would you and I accept that? I mean, we'd have to, but in a different way.

I brought some pictures I'd like to leave with you. There's not many of them. You can make it part of the record; you can have them. I think I've labeled them all on the back. This was right after we finished basic training.

MM: Which one is you? Is this....?

BB: You guys.... Come on! [Everyone laughs] That guy's got to be, today, two hundred pounds! That's me right here, and that's me on the left here. And that was in front of the mortuary tent.

UT: After basic training, how did they assign you this position, how does that happen?

BB: In basic training, we finished, say on a Sunday morning, and those who wanted to go to church, which we did. And we'd come back by 10 o'clock, and you were lined up in front of your barracks. And I was with my friends, so while about eighty guys in the barrack. So all eighty of us were waiting in line, this truck would come out and this guy with a roster would call "Smith, Jones," and

when they called your name you had to get in the truck. I was the only guy left standing, the only guy, and I thought, "What's going on?" So I'm about to take off, and this jeep comes running up and stops in front of me, and they say "Is your name Benson?" I said "yeah, it is." "Hop in." It was a corporal, so I said "Ok. Where are we going?" And he says, "To graves registration." And I said, "You got the wrong guy, it's not me!" and he said "Is that your name?" Because he didn't care, he wanted out of there. So that's where I was left off; that's how I started.

UT: Wow.

BB: The only thing I can think of on why I was selected, was, unfortunately, I told somebody I could type. Just that little thing, because you had to type up all your reports, you had a little portable typewriter. Like I said, 99 percent, of the fellows I ended up with, their families or relatives were involved somehow with mortuaries or were funeral directors, or whatever.

UT: Well, I think it's a good thing that you were assigned that, and not something else. Because you never know... You didn't have to see....

BB: I'm an artist part time, and believe it or not, I studied features a lot. Sometimes a rifle would nudge me, and they'd say "You're staring at that person." But I guess it was good in a sense, as I said earlier, it matured you fast, but also if you could pass the initial shock, and it took me a while, after a while I got immune to that. It teaches you a lesson which [to the students] you'll come to yourself — but hopefully not that way. But you say, "I could never do that." Well you can do it if you put your mind to it. You focus, and say, somebody's got to do it, and I'm it, and you do it. Whether it's going to college and studying for exams, you can do it.

UT: You would have to become desensitized to it.

BB: You do, because otherwise you'd literally crack up.

UT: You'd have to just say, well ok, that's just a shell, it's not who they were.

BB: But a lot of people had a lot of worse jobs, in actual combat.

UT: That's what I was thinking. I mean you're here and you can tell these stories.

BB: I was going with this girl one time, and I kick myself – so does my wife – because when I was in rest leave, I bought Mikimo pearls – you've heard of Mikimo pearls, they're like Tiffanies--

UT: Yes, Mikimoto pearls – I talked to the class about those one time. I said they're the best ones to get.

BB: I bought her a string of pearls, and I sent them to this girl. And I got a "Dear John" letter. [To the students] Did you ever hear of a Dear John? A Dear John letter is a letter that GIs would get, saying "Dear Ben, Sorry to tell you, I've met another guy and we're going to get married," or whatever. But I gave her this string of pearls, which I'm sorry I did, today.

UT: Yeah! That was a pretty nice gift.

BB: [Refers to photo on the desk] This is a Korean boy, he was about 15 or 16. He worked for us. His job was what we called a field runner, he would get different equipment we needed and bring it up. And this is of some buddies of mine; that was about a mile from the line, where we dug a foxhole.

UT: You mentioned when I was telling you about the gentleman we interviewed yesterday, in the cold in the Arctic. Now you said it was pretty darned cold in Korea, too?

BB: Yeah, it was. Everybody called it the land of the midnight... no, not the midnight sun, but beautiful. Well, I thought it was a

miserable country, quite frankly. It was hot in the summer and frigid cold, really cold...

UT: So, very extremes....

BB: Yeah. You can have that picture for your files.

MM: I notice there are African-Americans in that picture. Were you mixed with African-Americans?

BB: Yeah. Let me say this. I brought this along for you; I'd like you to have this, since you have an assignment. This is one I did of Truman some years ago. Now Truman—you brought up a good question—Truman was the president that desegregated the Armed Forces. He wrote what we call an executive order, meaning he could write an order and he didn't have to go through Congress or anything else, that was it. All Armed Services from that point on, I think it was in 1950, had to treat Afro-Americans, or Orientals, or whatever, had to be treated equally, on an equal basis. There was no more segregation.

UT: That's a beautiful picture.

BB: I've been collecting... over forty years I've done all the Presidents, from Washington to Obama. It's a lot of fun.

I want to mention, if you're interested, I teach a course up at SUNY, and I've also gone to high schools and elementary schools. What I do is I talk about Presidents, and I bring original documents, letters, appointments signed by them. So if that ever comes up in your history class, I'd be happy to do that.

UT: That's wonderful to know.

BB: A lot of people don't realize.... [To student] How many people do you think were killed in Korea? Just Americans?

MM: Ummm.

BB: I'm not trying to put you on the spot. Take a guess.

MM: A hundred thousand?

BB: Believe it or not, you're wrong, but you're not that terribly wrong. I ask people a lot older than you, and they say, "Maybe a thousand, no I'll change it, maybe twelve hundred?" Read my note, and you can have that. You can put that in the envelope if you want.

UT: Now, looking at that, and thinking about what I teach, I think, to me, the saddest thing about Korea is that nothing changed. The 38th parallel stayed...

BB: Oh Korea has changed dramatically.

UT: Oh, it has changed now. But I think the fact that we lost 51,000 men. They lost people. And it didn't... all it did was make the demilitarized zone more formal.

BB: Did you ever hear the terminology "The Forgotten War"? I have an older brother who was also in Korea. When you mentioned earlier, do I belong to a veterans association—he talks about Korea constantly, to the point where it's irritating to me. It's a country that, as I say, has developed quite a bit since I was there. But when I came home, it wasn't like World War II or Vietnam. A typical example was somebody coming up to you—and this was a high school friend of mine--he'd say "Gee, where have you been? I haven't seen you for a while?" And that was true. He had gone on to college right away.

UT: Now that you say something like that, you think about all the fanfare World War II vets got. You know, that infamous picture of the sailor kissing the girl in Times Square. It's over and everybody was thrilled. And then you have the other extreme with Vietnam, which I can remember being a young girl—

BB: Your dad was--

UT: My dad was between Korea and Vietnam.

BB: If you ever had the experience of going someplace where there are multiple veterans from multiple wars, the Vietnam soldier stands out, and not in a positive sense to me. I go to the VA in Rome once a year for a physical, and maybe I'm being unfair, but they're scuzzy looking. They're the type of guy that I wouldn't want my wife to see walking down the street in a dark area, unprotected. They have tattoos all over them. Maybe it's an unfair criticism, but they were very high on drugs. But even today, they just look.... I don't know....

UT: What I was thinking is that there was such disrespect for them when they came home. I think they were... I can remember watching the television, and that was back when there was one tv in the house, it was black and white, and there were three channels, and they were on the news and people were throwing things at them and yelling at them, saying things like "babykiller" and all of that. My cousin, who was in Vietnam, still will not talk about it to this day.

BB: Most of them don't. Remember they had Agent Orange.

UT: My dad worked for Dow Chemical, which manufactured Agent Orange. All this was really, I think for Vietnam there's nerves -- it still touches that. So Korea, I can see what you just said. It's totally forgotten.

BB: Have you interviewed veterans of World War II? Now that's a dying breed, because they're in their late 80s now.

UT: We don't have any this year.

BB: Well, maybe in a couple years, you won't have any, period. But I was saying [to the student interviewer], your name is Michael? I want to say this objectively, forget it's me saying this. I think not just

for your school, for this project, it's so important if you can bring history into the classroom. What do I mean by that? I'm saying, I don't know about you and I don't want to say it in front of your teacher, but reading a boring book... When I was your age, I had to learn about the Battle of Oriskany and all these dates, to this day I don't know what they did. But if you can bring, me or somebody else, or let's say somebody who has a Civil War collection, who can bring in letters from the during the Civil War, written during the battle, – that brings history alive, rather than reading about it. Let me conclude by saying this: as I told you, I teach a course up at SUNY about the Presidents, and I fill in once in a while for this professor when he takes his sabbatical. The average age of those college students is from 18 to 22. I'll ask them, after I've given them a course where we talked about Presidents, from George Washington to Obama. Keep in mind we have George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin Roosevelt, Truman, but they're pretty high up there in reputation. The question I'll ask them, I'll say, "Tell me, who in your mind was the best President we ever had, and who was the worst?" Ninety percent, you know what the answer is? Go ahead and guess.

MM: I don't know... George Washington?

BB: As the best, right? He's certainly right up there. And who was the worst in your mind? That's probably unfair, because if I say Warren Harding, you'd say Warren who? Who do you think is the worst?

MM: I don't know, I've only been around for three Presidents....

BB: Let me make it easy for you. Ninety percent of the answers were that the best President was Ronald Reagan. The worst President was George W. Bush. And I went back to this professor, there's something wrong with this educational setup. They're talking in a contemporary mode, meaning within... because they remember Reagan and they remember G. W. Bush. But they certainly weren't around for Franklin Roosevelt or Teddy Roosevelt or Truman – that's

just names in a book. But even having said that, where is history? Where is the teacher involved, when they can tell you Ronald Reagan was the best president we ever had? He was a tremendous communicator. George W. Bush, I criticize when he went into the war he did, but it takes a minimum of ten years to determine good, bad, or indifferent. Because papers come out, people die and they leave their remarks recorded. So this was an interesting insight for me while I'm teaching.

Is there any other question you may have?

MM: No, that's all.

BB: Well, it's been a lot of fun.

UT: You were wonderful – it was great!

BB: Ok.