Robert T. Booth (RTB)
Veteran

Nathan Searing (I)
Interviewer

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I: We're here at Bob Booth'**s** home at 33 Morrison Avenue in Plattsburgh and its 2:00 right now. I'm Nathan Searing, the interviewer. I'll just start with some simple questions. What is your full name?
RTB: Robert T. Booth.

I: And when were you born?
RTB: July 5, 1923.

I: What was your pre-war education?
RTB: Well, I got through high school. I went to Northrup School. I was at Yale University as a freshman for four months when Pearl Harbor started and the story begins there.

I: What was your occupation?
RTB: Student.

I: Student. How did you hear about Pearl Harbor and where were you when you heard about it and what was your reaction to that?
RTB: Well I was at college. I was wherever I was on the campus. As I recall the word came to us late in the day, dinnertime perhaps, and of course it was by word of mouth to begin with because communication was far less active then than it is now. It swelled up; it became, on-campus, almost a riot, a mob of students gathered together proclaiming all kinds of things and then got together and walked about seven or eight city blocks across campus to the President's house. To do what, I haven't any idea. Except if you've heard of mob psychology, it was a mob going to do something and full of bravery and outrage and determination and all that kind of stuff. So, what's the best thing to do – it's march on the President and scare him to death. That was after dark and he fortunately was in a two-story house with a sort of a porch at the second story level and he made some kind of an impromptu speech and told us to go back and get to work and that would do more good doing that than anything else. It kind of wound down after that. But it was a pretty upsetting day. And from that point on, of course, we really were no longer in control of our lives.

I: When did you enter the service?
RTB: About February 1943.

I: You enlisted yourself or were you drafted?
RTB: It's a long, complicated story. In college I was in ROTC, which meant that I was receiving classes for credit in military science as part of my regular curriculum. I had gradually increased the amount of investment they had put into my military education. So, we were held back from the draft. That point ran out, so we were obliged to enlist in what was called the enlisted reserve, which we did. From that point on, we were in college doing the same thing in uniform like one of many other kinds of programs like that, so that in the fall of 1943, I had been to Fort Bragg for basic training – field artillery. We came back to the campus in about October and went in to the so-called ASTP Program, which was another military owned program and stayed there until we received our assignments to go to Officer Candidate School at Fort Sill in Oklahoma and I came out of that after four months with Second Lieutenant bars and then got shipped to a military organization as a full time soldier and officer.

I: What branch of service did you enter?
RTB: Field Artillery, from start to finish.

I: Where did you receive your basic training and was there any significant experiences or feelings that you had there?
RTB: I was receiving training all along in the ROTC program. Basic training was a separate four-month, ordinary basic training with draftees and other college kids like me – that was at Fort Bragg.

I: What were your dates of service, you said you entered in…
RTB: Well, I was in the service as an enlisted man through basic training and then several months of college after that where I was still in the army, unassigned if you will after that training program, and then I had four months in Officer Candidate School and from that I was a cadet. I guess that was the rank I had. And then I became on an officer on June 3, 1944. Then I got assigned to the 87th Infantry Division which was a real military organization. Which is not to say the others weren't, it just changed and graduated step by step.

I: What was the theatre of action and the battles you were in in chronological order?
RTB: I went to Europe. Various things along the way that were interesting, but in any case, specifically on that point, we entered France in the first days of December 1944. It took a period of time to get the whole organization joined together in one place. We came in different ways at different times, and then had to be moved across France. So, we went from the Channel shore, so to speak, and we went inland. The first stop we made was at Metz which is a city on the Belgian border of France in Northern France, noted because it was on the crossroads of history. When an invasion occurred, Metz always got it over hundreds of years. It also, in those days before the war started, the French and the Germans had both built defensive lines all across their borders on the north and on the south. North of France, the Maginot Line was the French line. It had five massive forts that went three stories underground and all interconnected across the countryside at Metz which, in September 1944 had been overrun and bypassed. So, these islands of forts in the Maginot Line were just stuck there. They were forty miles

behind the front line and we, the American army, just sent in units constantly. They were under surveillance, surrounded, and our job was to harass them with artillery fire day and night. They had been there at least six weeks by the time we arrived and that was the first thing we did. We set up as artillerymen. Some very few went forward to be forward observers with the infantry. Most stayed with the guns, which I did. I just did whatever you did, firing at something you never saw and then after a few days of that, they surrendered to our troops and we moved on in Northern France to the province of Alsace, which is in the Saar Valley, which is a noted area historically and otherwise because it has coal mines and has iron mines. Alsace Province is a northern province that projects like a finger into Germany, and the people there are French and German. Some are truly French and truly German and speak the language. Everybody can do some of it and they have been owned by Germany or by France twenty times in the last 300 hundred years. They don't know who they are. They have handy the flag of each nation in their attic. Depending on who they belong to, they hang that flag up. So, we were there and that's where we started first to fight in the middle of December. And that's where I first was engaged and put to work as an artillery forward observer sitting beside an infantry company commander firing on the enemy and they jumped off and they did their first assault. It went on from there. My job was in and out. I was assigned; I was withdrawn; I went somewhere else and was assigned and so that continued until we had actually crossed the French border and actually could say we had entered Germany by a mile or two. When Christmas came, the Christmas period, the Battle of the Bulge, which was a fantastic massive operation, had started on December 16th so everything that had been done was in a state of changing and being transferred to meet that threat. So, we were stopped. We were in a holding pattern. We were pulled back on Christmas Eve, put on the road after that. A day and half, twenty-four hours no stop, freezing weather, had rushed up to Northern France to a city called Rouen where we were placed in what was called Strategic Reserve. They didn't know where they were going to plug us in, in other words, and then after a couple of days of that, we went forward into Belgium and began to take our part in that. Which I was involved in again similarly, and after… We were probably there no more than ten days. I'd been active a couple of times. Finally, I got into a situation where no matter how active it was, it didn't work out. We got wiped out and I was captured and so my story from that point is a different kind of military, but I became missing in action and marched across the countryside and that's what this pamphlet here is all about – from that point on. But that was my career. It was really very short. I didn't actually smell any gunpowder for more than a month and I wasn't up front being shot at all that while, either.

I: Yes, more in the back just shooting at…
RTB: Yes, either working with guns or going up front to be a forward observer, which I did in different places, but it wasn't a steady job in one location.

I: How did you feel about combat? Was there any sort of feelings there? I know you said you were in the back, kind of…
RTB: Combat, after all, is all about destruction and killing, so there was nothing funny about it. The comment in this form that we filled out wondered what was humorous. Well back in the barracks, there's humor and there's fun, but up front when you're being

shot at or about to be shot at, there's a certain amount of humor but it isn't any fun. So, aside from that, being in combat is a mixture of absolutely nothing going on – you could call it boredom – but there's nothing going on but waiting and wondering and that can go on for days. It ranges from that point to terror and everything in between. Any adjective that you wanted to use. Take your pick.

I: I read your bio. I know you had several medals and everything. Which medals and citations did you receive and why?
RTB: Well, the most important was the Silver Star which is a high-ranking award for what is called "gallantry in action"; that's what that is. I was in a position when I was captured that I was with a small, badly worn out remnants of a platoon of infantrymen in a situation where army intelligence thought that the Germans were mounting a large attack. It wasn't true, but nobody knew it. So, we were in a tiny village. I have pictures here I can show you a little of, holding the line. I was set up to join one unit that I normally would have been with. When I got to the point where I would be assigned and move forward, I was told to stop. They were being pulled out. I should go over here to another outfit that I had never been near and do the same thing with them. But they were there – they were under orders to hold at all costs, which are bad orders. They did, and in the time I was there which was two and half days, something like that, the expected attack never developed, but we were assaulted eight times over two and half days by attacks by infantry, heavily shelled, mortars and it sure looked like an attack if I ever saw one. We had casualties. They had casualties. We had tanks killed. They had tanks killed. It was just a full-fledged war in a small place in a little village. The whole purpose of our being there was that we controlled supply lines. That we had the ability to see and affect two major highways that ran parallel to our front. Farther west, there was still the German army, so we were sort of in the middle of the side of a huge bulge in the front lines. That was why our units were there. We had control of a vital set of roadways that were about two miles apart that ran parallel to where they had troops that needed ammunition, supplies, people and all that. So, that's what we were doing. It looked very real and it was real. A sidelight was that we were in a small sort of a communal country community, probably no more than ten houses on the crossroads. Ours was a several families, sort of a communal thing apparently, which was built of stone but it was built partly against the side of a hill so it had, call it a root cellar, dug into the side of the hill completely underground with access from the buildings. Twenty-five people were in that root cellar all the time we were there – civilians, ranging from age 82, the old lady that owned the place, to a four-month-old baby. And they underwent the same stuff we did because it was going on over their heads. We were above ground. They eventually were picked up shortly after we were marched off. So, it was a wild time and various happenings, casualties and stuff. A bad end for us, we ran out of… The biggest thing was that we were remote. The people behind us had been cleaned out. So, we were remote from any other American troops by as much as a half a mile, probably. That was just observation and that wasn't real people who could help and we were in contact with telephone lines. Infantry had them. We had them, but those lines got cut either by artillery fire or midnight patrol the night before we were captured. We had no telephone communication. The infantry had radios; we had radios; the radios died. The batteries froze or something. The infantry went first. I was

the last contact. My batteries died. And that was it. I couldn't help. When I was in contact, I would have to say the folks that were supporting me really went to work. It was astounding how much artillery, the records – I didn't really know this – but they really went all out to help, which was very pleasing. After the fact, but they did a heck of a job and it was the way it was supposed to be. In any case, no communication, can't help yourself. The infantry commander had gone. He had lost communication where he had been as well. So, nobody knew what happened to this, about thirty men, they weren't all in the same platoon, there were other kinds of clusters there too, but nobody knew what happened to them. The infantry had no contact; they didn't know. The artillery knew what was going on. I have the log book that they kept that described what was going on. They, however, didn't tell the infantry. The infantry didn't reach out to the artillery and say, "Hey guys, you know what's going on up there?" Just, again, communication failures all the way around. The infantry was so concerned that they scraped up fifteen men from a different part of their frontage that covered half a mile or so, fifteen men, and sent them across to try and find us and see what was going on. They went without knowing what was there and they ran into the tanks that were still in the woods above us. They were all killed; they never got to us. The frozen bodies were found two days after the event. So, nobody knew. We just got whisked off and there were a few who saw some things, but they really didn't know what they saw. So, there was an incomplete report about what our fate was. It took a long time to reconstruct. As fate would have it, we were finished on the 8th of January. At that time, the German army was under orders for the 10th, two days later, to begin their complete retreat. So, when they came out twenty-four hours later to try and find what was in this place we were, they didn't find any Germans. They just abandoned the place and withdrew and they didn't know what happened. They didn't know there was a retreat, so they cautiously sent out patrols. They went fifteen miles before they found the first German going away with us just ahead of them by one day's transit. It was a, well, strange set of circumstances. Nobody knew. Nobody knew. They had an idea; there wasn't much of another conclusion because there weren't a lot of dead bodies lying around for them to find. We got the casualties out the night before we were taken. That's how it goes. Multiply it by 100 times, that's how it goes.

I: How did you keep in touch with those at home and how often did you…?
RTB: Well, let's just limit it to being in Europe with fighting forces. The access we had would be rare. If we got leave and could get back to where the Red Cross had locations, it was possible to possibly telegraph. No telephone communication, no radio, no nothing. We communicated by so-called V-mail, which was letter writing. And you did it on a particular form that was provided by the military that went to a processing center in the States where it was photographed and reels of photographed letters called V-mail, Victory Mail, went out. Sometimes they went out by ship which was slow. Sometimes they went out in airplanes. Tens of thousands of them on several reels of film, of course, and then they get reprinted on paper and delivered through the military mail, which worked if it worked. But during, say, the Battle of the Bulge, nothing happened for three weeks. No mail. A lot of other things to take care of, and the mail just stacked up. I still have a bunch of letters that I wrote my family got after I was gone. Letters they wrote to me that I never got, that were returned to them. My wife was writing to me in the same

things. We have a stack of letters that never got anywhere. But there were several times when we were in transit, when you'd lose two or three weeks during that period of time, so that was literally it. When I eventually was freed as a captive, it came back as soon as possible after we were freed, that we were afforded through the Red Cross again a telegraph that we could send home, and that worked practically instantly, but all we said was that we're okay. There was no telephone, again, no radio, no nothing. But that was the first word my folks got – was of course the telegram was sent from me a few days after I was freed, probably about the 1st of May that they got that word. In between times, nothing. Theoretically, we as prisoners had – I may have got one post card. I'm not sure of that. I just don't think it got through. When I was a captive, of course, what had been a fairly orderly prisoner of war system that the Germans maintained, according to the rules pretty much, too, had fallen apart from the beginning of 1945. Everything was in flux, everything was a mess, and nothing worked. So, there was just nothing to be said about it. [unclear] but there was no way to make things work. Communication was not communication.

I: What was the food like and the supplies that you had available to you?
RTB: Very poor to abysmal. Military food on our side was far better than the German army was able to have. You've got to give the cooks and bakers a huge amount of credit because of their – let's say devotion and determination – to try to get hot food from the areas where the cooking occurred up to the front lines which usually was… They had pretty good containers to put things in and there were guys that drove jeeps up and got blown up in land mines and they would be operating in the middle of the night to get hot food up. Of course, the K-ration and the C-ration were things that you could carry around on your body and that was principally it, but the cooks and bakers were just fantastic. They weren't often obliged to fight, sometimes they were, but they gave it in devotion to the job and to the troops. It was really remarkable. So, our situation, foodwise was, sometimes it was terrible, because you couldn't get it through, but other times it was the best you could expect and it was very, very good, comparatively. The Germans tried, but they largely lived off the land and foraged and were on their own a great deal to either make it or starve. So, in that sense, we were in as good a shape as we could be, as humanly possible. A prisoner of war situation is entirely a different thing. That was dangerous. Starvation, literally. There wasn't anybody who didn't lose thirty pounds, some others did and then illnesses that went with it, injuries, wounds and such. It was pretty well – we would talk about that for a long time [unclear]. That was my post military experience. I don't know exactly how far… We could go three hours on that, that's a three-hour lecture.

I: How about the supplies you used, anything else, weapons?
RTB: What's it again?

I: Just the supplies that you had, how were those always working?
RTB: Well, we were well fed. We were well clothed. The biggest issues during that time, at least in midwinter, of course, in the coldest winter for fifty years that there had been went on steadily for the greater part of the month unbreaking. Previous to that, it was raining mud. That's natural over there. That's dangerous because if you slide

around without proper footgear for long enough, you end up with trench foot and as it gets colder then it becomes frostbite and absolute freezing sometimes. I, included, had frostbite injuries. There were people who simply froze to death in the foxholes. So, imagine anything you want to with all that happened, and the weather was equally tough on both armies. The weather was responsible for the big success of that German offensive because the whole area was fogbound, plus snowstorms, and the air force couldn't operate. Hitler had about three weeks of not being bothered by the U.S. Air Force or the British Air Force because you couldn't see anything to attack. Once the air force was able to function, that was catastrophic for the enemy. Very helpful to us, but for us, as prisoners of war, we were in danger from the U.S. Air Force because we, not I personally, but as a general thing, columns of men on a highway – you can't tell one side from another from the air – so there were columns of men that were strafed. I was in one, part of it was strafed. Boxcars, we got shipped in railroad box cars and that was a risk because railroad trains were a hot target. We had close calls. I was never in one that was strafed – others were. They got caught in bombing raids and wiped out that way.

I: Did they know that the prisoners of war were being transported by boxcar?
RTB: I suppose that, I don't know…They were the same boxcars that were used to haul military equipment and food and thousands of Jews and others to the crematories. The cars had bullet holes in them, no facilities of any kind, too many people in the box cars, no heat and whatever food you had, you had with you if you were lucky to receive it. No way to get out. They'd stop because they were afraid of an air attack. The Germans would all run and hide, and there we'd be. I had a friend who… One of the prison camps I was in was called Limburg. It was a noted camp near a railroad yard. Before I got there, just before Christmas in 1944, I think it was the British or American Air Force hit the railroad yard and they had a hang fire in one bomb that landed on the barracks. I think there were almost one hundred officers killed at that time. I had a friend who was in the same railroad yard. His box car was locked and he was in it with lots of other people, with bombs falling all around, but they didn't get hit. They just happened to be in the open space between the bombs. I have a little piece that he wrote about that many years ago. That's how I identified him and found him after that. That was a great thing that my wife and I have done over all the time in between is finding people all over the nation that I knew for five minutes, I might have a clue about, most I didn't. Of the people that I passed by with or spent some time with during all those times – it's sort of a hobby. If we can find a piece of thread to start pulling so we can find them – some were easy, but some were really quite a piece of work and so rewarding, because our taking the time to do that frequently was a great honor that we would think to do it in the lifestyle that others had. Anyway, lots of stories, one generates from another.

I: What was your most memorable experience and why?
RTB: Probably holding at all costs, surviving it and surviving what came after that. It was a pretty hairy experience. We were talking about awards, and the gallantry for action was that I, as a forward observer, several times called my artillery fire down on our heads. We were in a building, but when we left, the building was burning down over our heads, but I had done it. It was a little church that I fired a [unclear] out of in a

steeple and that was near the other building in a different place and that I have pictures of the destroyed properties that we were in, so to speak. But that was the big thing. And, like I said my artillery guys were highly supportive and highly loyal and they knew that I was up there and they were fighting for me, which was a great tribute. Anyway, you're not supposed to do that, generally. So, that's what that's all about.

I: How did you feel about your military experiences and why?
RTB: Well, first point I made was that after Pearl Harbor, her life and my life were not controlled by ourselves anymore. The war led us – encroaching military service on my part, her urge to serve somehow somewhere – the freedom to make up our own minds, go where we wanted to, didn't account whether or not we wanted to get married, didn't matter. We didn't have to face anything like you do, driving your own life and deciding where it's going, for five years. We went where the time and the circumstances dictated – we were ordered. I was sort of always near the military life here in…

Break in tape.

I: We were talking about your wife's experiences…
RTB: …times… Like … I almost… had been in the Plattsburgh camps here and went to Europe in the first World War, came back and was constantly active and socially active with the military people here… Mother's brother was a military… My father… I'm a child of the 26th infantry… My aunt married another officer here in Plattsburg. Another uncle was stationed… Army reserve… …for twenty years, in good times and bad with many stories to tell of both varieties. Served at several different bases in the United States. With stories to tell. It generally was – military life was generally okay…You don't know what a person is like until you put them all in a…Then they stand out in different ways… There was much of that through all the years. Of a particular thing… Life-long friends in that way… Many fantastic people and many that are not so good but it all was valuable. Maybe I just assumed that they are doing something else, but nobody else was doing anything else, so… That was a choice that was just not there. Well, the fact that I continued in the reserve – it means that it meant something important to me. And my brother did the same – he's a Korean vet. He was married even when he got pulled off which is a different aspect. Nice that I hung in there longer.

I: How did you feel about the use of the atomic bomb and why?
RTB: I would never criticize the use of the atomic bomb. I returned from what I had undergone. I was given some leave to get healthy again, reassigned back to Fort Sill to learn how to be a front-line artillery observer again because they assumed I had lost all my knowledge and credibility, and where was I going – I was going to Japan. It was over shortly after we got married, so I wasn't going to go to Japan, but I was locked into that plan no matter what and I was in the service four months more than they needed me for anything, but that's the way it was. There isn't anybody of my generation that would do anything but punch you between the eyes if you criticize the use of the atom bomb, just that simple. Well, it saved a million lives, ours.

I: How did you learn about V-J Day and what were your feelings about that?

RTB: V-J Day. We had just been married. We had a three-day honeymoon and we were off on orders to report to Asheville, NC, for my rehabilitation of my military records and physical exams and such and then reassigned. We were halfway there in our really old car and ended up in a fleabag motel in Shippensburg, PA when V-J Day was announced. We were on the outskirts of town. It was fleabag because we found we had bedbugs in the motel. There was no television or nothing. It was a cold-water thing. We heard lots of cheering and noise and I think maybe even people shooting off guns, but a great deal of riotous activity down in town, but didn't have any radio. Nobody came to tell us what was going on. It was V-J day. We stayed out of it, because we didn't see any point in getting involved in some local riot and getting wiped out in a family fight or something. We didn't find out about it until the next morning. It was all over. So, that was our V-J Day celebration.

I: When you were in the war, were you aware of the concentration camps and what was your reaction when you found out about those?
RTB: I specifically don't know when I became fully aware of concentration camps. I must have known about them. However, I spent four months in Germany. I went from village to village. I went from prison camp to prison camp from neglect, illness, danger, solitary confinement and interrogation, passing through villages that had been blown to hell and gone, threatened at one village that had been recently bombed by a populace that wanted to stone us and hoist us up on pitchforks and stuff like that. It was wise not to have an aviator's uniform if you were marching in a column of POWs. Slave labor gets fairly close to death camps. Russian slave labor is right on the doorstep of being a death camp. We ran into a situation involving that kind of a thing and an episode that took place involving them, and how the German guards treated them and such. So, I had a pretty good feel for some of the bad sides of the German people – the German system. What specifically… And, then of course from the prison camp side, too, which were not death camps, people died but they weren't extermination camps [unclear]. So, yes, I was on the fringes of intimate knowledge, specific knowledge about the whole system and depth [unclear], but I lived pretty close to that at times. I have a great empathy for it and I am very interested in the things that happened when the Jewish community celebrates in the spring here on campus and I have been to a number of those and I know a number of people who lived past that and many folks that have relatives in this community and some survivors as well. What do you know when you are eighteen, nineteen years old and you don't know much, but when you stop to think about it [unclear] there were many similarities [unclear].

I: And how did you learn about V-E Day – where were you and what were your feelings then?
RTB: V-E Day, I was at the last prison camp that I got to which was in Bavaria. We'd been 285 miles from where I was captured, all across part of Belgium, Luxemburg and Germany, all the way there by one means or another, ended up at that camp perhaps ten days before it was freed by the American army. It was a camp called Moosburg, which was built in the 1940's as a transit processing camp for soldiers of all the armies that the German army was fighting at that time. They must have had 25 nationalities that passed through that camp. It was supposed to be a focusing down and then a

reassignment location built for 10,000 people. When it was liberated it had 108,000 people in it of which 3,500, perhaps, were Americans. We were segregated from most of them. It represented every nation in Europe by the tens of thousands. Some military, many were different grades of civilian captives. Can you imagine, as Commander of the Seventh Army, or I guess it was the Third Army that freed us, General Patton again having suddenly to take care of another 100-odd thousand people that needed to be fed all in one swoop. What a day's work that is and what a pain, so we… And it was unmanageable, totally unmanageable. Took an awful long time to get on top of that and therefore while I was officially back in the U.S. Army on April 29 which would be Liberation Day, V-E day was May 8th. So, during the period of time I was liberated, I got a medal for being in the Army of Occupation because I was once again a U.S. soldier and I was on German soil. So, I didn't raise a finger at that, but I got a medal which was important because each medal you got was worth five points on your discharge scale. The more points you had, the sooner you got discharged. You collected all the medals you could get because… So, anyway, that was a big event. The trouble is that I was freed, captured twice, freed twice, freed three times, before it was all over and each time they come to liberate the jail you're in, there's an awful lot of firing going on, shooting at each other, and there's rockets and there's tank fire and they battle each other around and of course, there you are groveling on the floor or a ditch or something while the bullets are going through your prison camp. One side drives the other away from it, and well, it's a little bit hair raising to be freed. Where I was, we didn't suffer casualties. We watched the bullets go by. Like I say I was liberated twice. General Patton had a son-in-law who was a colonel who got captured in the North African phases which was several years before my time – he was in the system in Germany for a long time and General Patton was obsessive about getting him out because he was a valuable son-in-law and a valuable – he was a colonel. His career was interrupted and he needed to be put back to work because the army needed him, kind of thing. Patton drove everybody crazy with that philosophy. At times, you knew where the prisoners were, especially high rankers. Nobody ever knew where I was. You might know where a full colonel was, but they got moved. And then in January, everything fell apart. Nobody knew anything. He was on a long road march from the Baltic Sea down to Germany, and the only place that that column, which went 600 miles before it was done, could end up was where we were, so Patton was within sixty miles. He sent out a strike force of 300 men and tanks and such to come and free our camp, that his son-in-law was in, by the way. He sent his favorite long-time military aide along with it to find the right person because all that ever was admitted until after Patton died. It was evident from many different scraps of information although he constantly denied it, and they came and they knocked down the walls and we were freed in different ways. I joined a couple of other guys and we tried to take off across country, which didn't work. A couple of days we got bagged up again, but they mostly all got taken back to camp and then started marching out and getting shipped out in box cars. That was one event. That was the first liberation and the second big one was the one that took.

I: What did you do when you arrived home?
RTB: Well, I didn't kiss the ground. I was kind of matter-of-fact about it because I wanted to go home. I had access to a phone. The line was that long in front of… Pay

phones, when we finally got established at a camp outside New York Harbor… Came home, I got trapped and I got married. I was in a weakened condition and my wife snatched me up. She'll deny it, but anyway. Well, I was still recovering from malnutrition mostly, so there was that and then moving on and getting reassigned and all those kinds of things. Those were the activities. It's anecdotal that people have a strange feeling about watching the Statue of Liberty go by when you leave New York Harbor by ship and then coming back. It's true. It's true. It's a real… It's really symbolic of something special, especially to see it the second time.

I: Do you belong to any veteran's organizations now?
RTB: Well, yes, there's a million you could belong to. I belong to the American Legion here. My father was the creator of Post 20 America and so I wouldn't think of anything else. As a matter of fact, he had me in it before I was back from Europe. In any case, I've been there ever since. I sort of identify with it because I am the oldest son of the commander. I belong to an organization of former prisoners of war. I belong to an association related to the military division that I was in. They're running out of gas because they're mostly people of WWII. The 87th Division thing had its last reunion run by the old guard. A new group of their children are trying to keep it going. That's sort of doubtful, I think. The old guys have more and more trouble getting there of course. It was enjoyable, but they have run out of gas. They had two of them making farewell remarks and two of them said, "Well you know, I just barely made this. I went to see my doctor a couple of days before I had to come up here and he said it was about time for me to have a stint put in, an artery in my heart and we'd better get at it. And I said, "You wait right here, I'll be back in ten days." Two of them came up with the same story. [Laughs] I haven't heard that they didn't make it. That's how important it was.

I: I know you have already kind of said – how has your military experience changed or influenced your life? Any other comments on that?
RTB: Well, it established my life for five years. My life changed after I wasn't in the military. Then I was a civilian; a different category. Went back to law school and went on to earn a living and all the other things that… But, yes, as we've just said, there's bombs, there's friends, there's stories to tell, and constantly there are new things to find out that I never knew, so it never stops being something that I, and I'll say I, am associated with, that's of interest to me, that I continue to learn from. In some respects, I can be helpful and useful. In some respects, I am willing and able to do what we're doing. I've done it lots at different levels. Yes, all that's valuable to me. I understand about the military and how it runs and how things are when the going is bad and all that, so that never goes away. It needs to be said of course that many, many people have suffered far more than I did in a way that damaged them. They came away physically damaged or mentally damaged. There are people that just won't talk about it; that haven't talked about it for sixty years and never will. I never felt that way about it because I didn't get in it, if you will, as deep in the killing stage as others that were [unclear], no question. So, it varies. It depends on if you were in charge of keeping tank truck #1 full of gasoline and running it back and forth, why you'd have a different point of view about military life and you might have played with the black market or something like that. No, I was real life military. Part of my structure.

I: Well, I guess that kinds of sums it up. I think that's pretty much it.
RTB: You followed the script pretty well. Just pour your own [unclear]. This is…

I: You can go ahead.
RTB: Well, it won't show up on the camera, but… [Shows a series of photographs to the interviewer.] Here is a picture in December of 1944 – those are field artillerymen. They are living in a hole in the ground. They have a stove down there and they're burning the cardboard packages that the artillery ammunition was shipped in. If you could see his face, it's probably the color of charcoal because they were burning stuff that was full of creosote, breathing it and so on, and this picture isn't good enough to show a gun position. That's a pup tent, but these are gun crew members. That's a very, very famous picture of winter warfare. They're infantry guys with their pup tents. They've been issued snowshoes, so they may not have frostbite injuries. They are in the chow line and that picture has been repeated many times in famous places. One of our units being served in the mess tent.

I: These aren't pictures you have personally taken?
RTB: Well, they come from different sources. That's from the U.S. Signal Corps, from a close friend in Washington who my father grew up with and he was the Chief Clerk of our Congressman and he busted his butt down there in all the back alleys and hallways in behalf of my family trying to find out something about me while I was missing and he produced these pictures from Signal Corps archives. That's the dead-end telegram that shuts the family down.

I: Interesting.
RTB: It's real. When you run it through your mind, that doesn't say anything except disappeared in space, no advice, no hope, no effort to find out what happened, no promises of any kind.

I: I can see why the first message back would just be, "I'm okay."
RTB: Well, yes, and no communications of course after that, not a single thing, complete destitution. It's almost easier to have it killed in action because you know something. There were 92 days before they found out that I had been once alive after that and that's because a fellow from Plattsburgh was at the same prison camp I was at. He had enlisted in the Canadian Army, but we fell together at this prison camp and got to know each other. He was an enlisted man and he was Canadian besides. I was an officer and I was an American and so I went off in a different direction from that camp before he did. They shipped me east; they shipped him west to join up with British and Canadian troops. Sooner or later they preferred to do it that way, I guess. But in any case, he was freed a month before I was in that process. And he got his telegram to send

to his mother and he told her, "Number one, I'm fine, I'm free, I'm not hurt. Number two, call across town and tell lawyer Booth and his family that I saw his son on such and such," but it was a period that was 92 days before that. That's the first glimmer of hope they had had in spite of all the efforts that my father was doing through all the channels that he had. The whole process is a whole other story, what they went though, what a family goes through. That's my place of work. The big building is our stronghold and had the root cellar and is falling in because I set it on fire. It was coming down around our ears sooner or later before we got captured out of it.

I: Wow, it's a mess.
RTB: It was a multi-story building. Next to it was a little church and it had, I think I did that too, it had a steeple where one of the infantry guys had gone up and taken a peek, and he saw a tank sitting over on top of a hilltop. And he could see their radio antennas through the underbrush and they were looking at some of our troops off in another direction so we dumped some artillery on them and sent them away. That is a real live prison camp that I was in it at Limburg. That happened to be sick day. Those people are sick, but that's exactly what they looked like. Whether they were sick or not, everybody had dysentery or diarrhea. Everybody was losing weight from malnutrition; everybody would develop one or another kind of an additional illness that… That was taken about a side issue of whose son is alive and whose son is dead, but that's what the inside of that looks like. Those are the first atrocity pictures that came out just about that time and the one there was – I knew him. He was in my division. He was captured a day after I was. He probably had pneumonia, so he was in sick bay. He couldn't even get up and wobble around. The interesting sidelight – he survived. These people… That guy – survived.

I: Wow, he looks like a skeleton. That's crazy.
RTB: Joe Demmler. He was still alive in 1996. He weighed 68 pounds. He was liberated. Well, anyway, that's some that were super-sick. Oh, I was going to tell you, he had pneumonia or something and was feverish so he was warmer than the rest of us. Certainly his body temperature was three or four degrees more than the rest of us. We all had body lice. The body lice liked a warm body better than a cold body so he had four times the number of lice of somebody like me who wasn't sick. That was a very strange kind of thing, and they were sucking him dry, among other things. So, that's just a sidelight of what it's all about. There're pictures, but it's kind of hard to get pictures of prison.

I: Yes, it seems pretty weird that they would actually even have any. Just seems strange that they would even… Do you know who took these pictures? This was right after…
RTB: This is a print from Time Magazine so either their reporter did or it was assembled from the Associated Press. It's a composite. It's not, I don't think, well, during the time that these would have been generated they were beginning to run on to the prison camps and to capture them, so there were probably several different ones that could have been spliced together, but that just… Because I don't know these other guys, specifically. I know him and I know what he was. And I don't think he even got moved out of that camp. He couldn't travel. Tom Barry did and he's the one that reported on

me back home. I went… We sailed from New York Harbor. We landed in Liverpool, England and came in several different ships, assembled a military division of 15,000 men in a number of villages and brought in their equipment and outfitted them with right number of trucks and equipment and things like that and that took the better part of three weeks, and moved the whole body across England to the Channel where we got on a series of ships and went towards France and some ended up on the French shore. We went out in an LST, a landing ship tank, which held approximately our whole unit of 500 men and vehicles and guns. We went up the River Seine, Now if you take out an atlas and look at the River Seine, it goes into France and it goes like this [makes a curved motion with hand] and on the right bank is where the great breakthrough that took place after the landings at Falaise Gap and the German army piled up against the river. The U.S. Air Force was working, so anything that got jammed up against the river was just shredded; mounds and miles shredded. Personnel and horses and people and everything else. You could see the fringe of that wreckage along the ridge beside the river. This was December. That had happened in August – all piled up there. A bridge, here and there, would be blown. They couldn't get across the bridges. This LST, which was one hundred feet long, maybe one hundred fifty, flat bottom, it steered like a building block, no keel, and the commander had to get that thing through a river that was one third as wide because the bridge blocked. There was an opening and because the water was forced around by the wreckage, there was a current in there that made it exceedingly difficult to hold onto the ship. How he did that, I haven't any idea, but we got through. We were fifty miles inland when we were over, as the crow flies, we probably had gone a hundred miles on the river to get there. We unloaded in a city called Rouen at the steps of an ancient cathedral that goes back 486 years or a thousand years. It was very picturesque. We simply drove off. But in any case, in that ship, I bunked in with a naval officer named Lieutenant Portall. I had the upper deck and he had the lower bunk in his state room and were together a couple of days and said farewell and didn't think we'd ever see… Coming out in June in France, they eventually got to the shore and were loading up on ship to come back and who should I meet wandering about the dock but Lieutenant Portall. We compared notes about what we'd been doing for the last six months. I'd had a wilder time than he had. He was just a ferry boat captain on the Channel, which by that time was not bad doing because the city of Le Havre, which is a major port was a major target. I mean they got hit by the British Air Force and the U.S. Air Force and the Navies of both and there was nothing there but shreds of this and that. If there were buildings, then they were piles of rubble, and if there were docks, they were all askew. The only way you could still use it as a harbor… And full of sunken ships too, so it was a real mess and as a harbor it was very hard to use at best. The docks were simply, well, specially made barges, they were floatable, tied to the shore, and that's the best use they could make out of a major harbor in Europe at the time which was the last… Coming down there through that city having come across all of France where everything was destitution, shot up, homes gone, businesses dead, cattle still, all the rest. Then you come to Le Havre, absolute wasteland. Springtime – it was June. Grass was green. You'd think flowers would be coming up – well they weren't. Grass was green. The trees, there wasn't a tree that was strong enough to grow a leaf, they were shattered – total desolation. It was just the last memory I had of Europe and I never cared whether I went back there for fifty years. It never interested

me. I wouldn't have stirred if somebody had given me a ticket to go over and see it, although I knew deep in my heart it was much different. They've rebuilt it. It's magnificent now. Until about fifty years later a group of this prisoner of war organization put together a private self-arranged tour, which about fifty of us and wives and daughters and such took, and the object was that we were going to go to a particular place individually important to each of us and it worked. The people that ran it had been back and forth and had relationships with things like the American Legion that exist over there and it was a good hook-up because we always had a couple of those people with us wherever we went who spoke the language too. It was helpful. Well, we had to deal with French, we had to deal with the Luxembourg language which some claim they can speak and some find they can't because it's a mixture of German and their own thing and a little bit of French and you've got to be on your toes to do that. But that was a very satisfying thing and I guess we went to England several times, but just once in France. That satisfied. It's just absolutely didn't care about it, they did…

I: After being through all that.
RTB: It's terrible what we can do to each other.