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AN INTERVIEW WITH BEN FRANKLIN

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INTERVIEWED BY  
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BRAUM DENTON: This begins an interview in—on March 10, 2005 in Knoxville, Tennessee with Ben Franklin and ...

JOHN ROMEISER: ... John Romeiser ...

DENTON: ... and Braum Denton. And first we want to start off with ... where we left off on the last interview in Paris. And then I believe it was when you sold off your firearms and your canteen and you were ...

BEN FRANKLIN: Oh what all I lost in Paris, yeah.

DENTON: Right, and then we go up from there.

FRANKLIN: Well, when I went into Paris and my friend and I both had a case of C-rations—we got this from our unit and we both had pistols and a belt and the necessary equipment. And when we left Paris we didn't have anything because of—we had to support our misadventure while in Paris with a couple of young Parisian ladies. And I ... use that word ... unsure of what I'm saying. But at least they were women, and they were human, and they were warm, and they were compassionate, and they were passionate, and everything else that a young soldier is looking for, they had it. In order to perpetuate our living together for the eight days I was there, it was necessary since they could not work, they were entertaining my friend and I, it was necessary that we sell our pistol and our pistol belt and everything. So we left Paris unarmed ... but we were fulfilled with all the needs of a young soldier. All of his basic, or I should, perhaps I should say, all of his ... salacious and fallacious needs. We were sexually saturated, we had fulfilled our dream of enjoying a woman to the fullest, we were very confident in the fact that now if we got killed, we had already enjoyed everything in life. You know, life could not offer more than that eight days in Paris. So we were quite content.

We rejoined the regiment at a place called Soissons, which is north of France. We left the regiment southeast of Paris in a little town called Etampes. [A] very small little village—that's where we left 'em. We rejoined the regiment at Sou' Saints and after being dehumanized and degraded by the battalion commander and reduced in rank, we rejoined our company and proceeded on in column with tanks supporting and ... we went toward Mons, Belgium. The thought being, strategically, was to cut off the retreating German Army that had been defeated in Normandy. We were trying to cut them off, what was left of them, after Falaise Gap so that they did not get back to Germany and man the Seigfreid line. That was the purpose of this swinging north. And we had some brief encounters and some very quick and ... fierce firefights. ... And then there were days when we just rode along on tanks and eventually we got to Mons. And we stayed in Mons from—and my memory is not this good anymore, but we stayed in Mons, Belgium liberating Mons from about the third or fourth of September '44 until the ninth or tenth of September. I don't remember the exact day we left, but while in Mons, we all formed—we were in little taskforces. We had a company of infantry, five light tanks, and a platoon of machine guns. That represented a little taskforce, and we would go out on a roadblock and establish a roadblock, and any Germans coming there we'd block them and catch them. In addition, the Belgium underground, or the ... Freedom Fighters, would come to us and say, "We know there are Germans here or there are Germans there who are trying to get back." And you

must keep in mind that the Germans deserted their equipment, their heavy equipment. They could not escape with it, so they were all on foot and they all had small arms—they had no heavy equipment, no tanks or anything. So it was a matter of just going out and shooting them up and taking what was left. Not ... a ... unpleasant time. The weather was beautiful. I distinctly remember that. And then after a ... week or so in Mons—and we made some friends in Mons with some people, even with some girls—some of the boys did. And ... but I was a little leery of getting involved again after Paris because I was threatened that they would put me up against the wall and shoot me for desertion. (Laughter) So that was enough to get me back in line.

So after a while, we jumped off and we went back in regimental force again with elements of the Third Armored Division. We went from Mons to Namur Liege and I remember distinctly on the twelfth of September, we crossed the German border. Now the reason I remember this is because we stopped and the company commander came and made each Belgium patriot like you—your age or so (speaking to Denton) that had joined our unit, made him go back. They did not let them cross the border. I could not understand why, but this is the way things—you don't question things, you just accept them. We crossed the German border, and that night we went into a little town, I'll never forget this. [We] went into a little town and heavy artillery started landing in the town. We were in a column. The regiment was, our battalion was in a column, and behind—we had ... I Company, my platoon and machine guns, then the battalion commander was right behind my platoon of machine guns. And he was speaking on the radio—and I talked to him about this later—and he was saying ... now I forget the code name. Anyway, he was telling whoever was firing the 240s, that's the big 240s, to lift their fire. They're firing in blue battalion area. Very calm, he was very calm about it. And I remember that distinctly. Then we pushed on to Aachen and we—my regiment went around to the east of Aachen just like we did Paris. Had a very—the regiment, the division had a very stable way of doing things. Number one, we always attack at three o'clock in the morning. Number two, if there's a cutoff problem, the Sixteenth always went around, my regiment, went around and cut the town off and blocked it from any reinforcements coming from any others. So my regiment went to the east of Aachen to block the German Army from coming in to reinforce. The Eighteenth went from the south end, and the Twenty-Sixth went directly into Aachen. And that was the tactics. Of course, being a young soldier, I was not aware of the overall strategic ... goal, but I knew we were .... in the east part of Aachen because—I later saw a map of a place called Crucifix Hill, which the Eighteenth Infantry was attacking, and we were east of it and my machine guns poured in, my particular section of guns poured in twenty-five boxes of ammunition on Crucifix Hill, you know. And the reason I remember this is we had to pull the tracers. See you had two regular rounds, one armor person, and one tracer in a belt. Then it's, again, two, one, and one. And we had to pull the tracers out because we were firing and we didn't want the counter-fire to find us. And all of us wore blisters on our hands pulling the tracers out and pushing in a regular round. And we fired at the Crucifix Hill very, very effective. We got no counter-fire. We run down in the basement of a house, of an apartment building right down in the basement—nobody fired back at us. And we stayed there ... oh a few days. Most of October, latter part of September, and most of October we stayed in that area.

DENTON: Now how many men were in this basement?

FRANKLIN: How many men were in the basement?

DENTON: With you?

FRANKLIN: We just had one platoon.

DENTON: Okay.

FRANKLIN: And then one platoon of machine guns was normally thirty-six men, thirty-six to forty-four. But then we were cut down in strength. We had about eighteen or nineteen people in the platoon because we had casualties and no replacements, see? And the reason is because in machine guns, you do not have as many replacements—you don't need as many replacements as you do in a rifle platoon. Rifle platoons were cut down from forty-two men down to, sometimes, eight or ten people, and particularly in I Company, the company we were always attached to. So we stayed there, and it was not ... really difficult. And then when Aachen fell, we jumped off toward what was called "The Advance Towards the Ruhr," the Ruhr River. Of which, I was not familiar with that, but I just later learned that we were trying to reach the Ruhr River. And the Ruhr, of course, is the dominant arms producing region of Germany, the Ruhr Valley. It's the most industrialized part of Germany, and our goal, our overall strategic goal was to get in there and capture that. In order to do that, we had the infantry—had to go and take the Ruhr and cross it. Well, on the way we had to go through Stolberg and then we ended up in the Hurtgen Forest. Now the Hurtgen Forest is ... it's an unexplainable mistake of the American General staff, not to be questioned by simple soldiers. We simply obeyed orders and organized—four divisions took part in the ... area of the Hurtgen Forest. In the Hurtgen Forest, we had 35,000 casualties out of four divisions. Well, if you figure the average division normally has 14,000 to 16,000 men in it, but after they've been on the line for six months like we had been, we were reduced down to a division, maybe 10,000 a division. So out of 40,000 or 45,000 troops that participated in the Hurtgen Forest, we had 33,000 casualties. So that—you can readily see the impact casualty wise of the Hurtgen Forest. Now why? One, there were no roads through the Hurtgen Forest, there were simply fire trails. Two, the trees were located—it was so dense so close together that you could not even drive a Jeep between them. So everything was on foot and you had to carry everything, and the weather was miserable. It rained constantly. I don't remember not raining. I don't remember ever being dry on any part of my body in the over thirty days I was in the Hurtgen Forest. The artillery would come in—course the German had registered the artillery particularly on the fire trails, and we tried to use tanks a couple of times and M-10s, a tank destroyer on these fire trails, but the Germans would lock them and knock them out, you know. They couldn't maneuver. They couldn't—they just had to just stay on the path there. So they saw their futility of that, how stupid it was so, they quit that. And it ended up that we had to fight viciously for yards. To advance fifty yards in two days was quite an accomplishment. The Hurtgen Forest was perhaps twenty-five, I don't know, twenty-five or thirty miles deep.

I remember that we come to a town called Hamich and I did see a map from the platoon leader, platoon sergeant at that time, and there was a castle just beyond Hamich, which was the dominant ... the castle dominated everything around it. And it was our objective, along with I Company, to take it. And it was vicious to take it, absolutely vicious. But we had hopes if we can take this castle, we will get inside and we'll get out of the rain and we'll get warm and we'll be able to heat up some C-rations and we will be able to have a little—maybe even wash our

balls, you know. Where ... I hate to say this son, but the truth of the matter is, you don't wash your balls for thirty or forty days, they get ... filthy and they burn and they itch, and it's an unpleasant thing. (Laughter) I hate to reduce the ... element of war to that level, but it's, that's a fact. So we had hopes of doing it. And after perhaps a week of fighting, vicious fighting, we took the castle. We finally took the castle, and I remember distinctly a man named Lieutenant Wolf was with, at that time, he was with K Company, and K Company came to relieve us. And I later met Lieutenant Wolf as a colonel out in California at a reunion, and he remembered exactly this—course he acted as though he remembered me, I'm sure he didn't. But I remembered him because he was in charge, and he told us we had to get out because F Company is moving in. (Laughs) We just took the damn thing and hour before then, you know. So we had to get out and go up on the hill. F Company moved—or K Company moved in and took over the castle. Then he told me that night battalion came up and run him out and battalion headquarters took over the castle. (Laughter) But I remember the castle at the town of Hamich and to me that's the outstanding memory of the Hurtgen Forest.

DENTON: Mm hmm.

FRANKLIN: Now we're pushing from into late November, pretty close to December. Now we're getting snow and rain and the weather's terrible and everything. And then word come over, came that we were gonna be relieved. We were going to get a rest and we had not had a rest since the invasion of Normandy. And from June 6 'til ... December 7, 8 along in that time, we had not been, we had been in constant combat, except for the short period that I had in Paris, but that was called a contact sport that I had in Paris. (Laughs) So I was really in contact with something from D-Day all the way. Of course, the episode in Paris was more pleasurable than the other contact. But anyway we looked forward to that, and they also said some people would be going home, you know. Now I regretted not getting Purple Hearts when I got hurt or when I got wounded. Now I regretted not being heroic at times when all I had to do was tell somebody to turn me in for something, you know. And I said, "Fuck it. I'm not interested in that shit."

DENTON: Because you earned ... certain points.

FRANKLIN: Hmm?

DENTON: They give a point award system.

FRANKLIN: Yes. Yes. Yeah.

DENTON: Okay.

FRANKLIN: And they took—in each company, when they did, they pulled us back about the—and I'm ... I regret that I don't remember the exact date, but it was pretty close to the 8, 7, 8, or 9 of December. They pulled us back to Havre in Belgium. Now Havre is not too far from Mons where we—but I had no recollection of Havre. I don't have ... didn't remember getting .... But got back, and they had showers, and new uniforms, and food, and they took the three most highly decorated men in the company and sent them back to the States, see? Now I regret not—well, I may not have been wounded or ... essentially wounded, but I didn't—in my regiment, in order to

get the Purple Heart—and I have the documents right there—you had to be written up by a company medic that state that you had to be an emergency evacuation from the frontline. Otherwise you do not get the Purple Heart. Well what happened if you evacuated from the, if you were evacuated from the frontline, you know, machine gun company, and you went to the hospital, when you come back to the regiment if they needed somebody in the rifle company they would put you there. Now eighty percent of all casualties in World War II were in rifle companies. If you'll think now that for every soldier in a rifle company you had thirteen other soldiers supporting him, but he had eighty percent of the casualties and the other people only had twenty percent. So you know who was getting killed, and I did not want to be part of that. That's why I say that not only was I lucky, but I was smart. So when I got a minor wound, I wrapped it up and I went on about my business, you know. I thought they'd forget it. And now I regret it, I regretted it then. So I was never tempted to put myself in for bravery because that's one thing that I was not. I simply did what I had to do and ... on occasion was reluctant to do that. You know, I did not want to push my luck. But I had lost my best friend in Aachen, and I was still very upset about it. Uh ... I should tell you about it.

When you are taken from an environment of civil human life, and placed into an environment that you are, with which you are unfamiliar, then you suddenly find yourself cut off from all of the things that you know, you know. I was not prepared to kill people, I was not prepared to have people laying, and stinking, and their bellies blowing up in the desert and then they suddenly go "Pop!" You know, I was not prepared for that. I was not prepared for deliberately setting booby traps to kill people ... this I was not ... prepared for. I had never had a woman who I could love and certainly I did not love my family. I had no reason to love my family. Although ... this perhaps is an overstatement—we all love despite the fact that we don't want to. ... But I had this friend who, he and I went through basic training together, and we went through Africa together, and Sicily together, and we took, had the same woman, and we were just inseparable. And we both rose in rank—I a little ahead of him ... although he was older and smarter than I was, for some reason they promoted me a little quicker than him. And we get into Aachen and ... if I had ever loved someone, and not for a homosexual reason, but for a human reason, I love this human being. He was ... he was just something that, you know, with a woman that you love you are jealous of her past. You are jealous of who she went with before. You are jealous of what she's doing now. You are, although you love her, you resent certain actions, certain ways—the smell of them, the taste of them. There are little things that you resent more and more with a woman. But with a friend you accept the son-of-a-bitch the way he is. You know, this is how he is you either accept him. If he farts in public, okay that's the way it is, you know. This is a friend as opposed to a lover. So since I had never loved, this friend, of course, I could say that we had an extremely deep friendship. Nothing homosexual or nothing like that ...

DENTON: Sure. Sure.

FRANKLIN: ... Although we kidded each other a lot about screwing dromedaries, you know. (Laughter) He said, "Let's go over and do ...." An Arab come through with a caravan of dromedaries, and they camped close by and he said, " Let's go over and screw one of them dromedaries." We're in the dessert. I said, "Actually, I don't think they, any of those things

would turn me on.” He said, “No damn wonder,” [he] said, “you’d probably picked the ugliest son-of-a-bitch in the herd.” (Laughter) You know, little things like that.

DENTON: Right.

FRANKLIN: And we were just open with each other. I was never critical of him, he was never critical of me, and although we were—eventually when we became staff sergeants, he took over one section and I took over another section. We were always within a hundred yards of each other. You know, always. So in Aachen ... about the nineteenth of October, my section—I had my section of machine guns in one, it was a factory. A long slim building, with a roof like this, and about twenty yards over was another building the same way with a roof over it, and we had our machine guns up at the front end to fire out that way. And he hollered over, did I have a pack of cigarettes, and I said, yeah. So he said, “I’ll come over.” And it was raining, and muddy, and miserable. So I’m looking out, and he’s come out of the building and he’s walking between the two buildings and a mortar round hits right behind him (claps hands) and kills him. Blows him forward, you know, and all his back .... He fell down in the mud, and ... to me this was the worse thing that could possibly happen, you know, to lose my best friend. And ... I perhaps lost it. I’m not sure that I didn’t emotionally lose it. Because I got him and took him into a building, and I cleaned his face and I held him in my lap and I refused to leave. And the platoon moved out and finally the platoon sergeant ... came back and said, “Ben, you gotta go.” And I said, “No, I’m not leaving.” And he said, “You son-of-a-bitch, you gotta go or I’m going to kill ya.” And so I had to go. And he—his name was Jim Bottomley. He was from Brooklyn, New York. He was forty-two years old and he had false teeth, and he was the meanest son-of-a-bitch in the world. Nobody was as mean as Jim Bottomley. But—and I knew he would kill me. There’s no doubt that he would definitely shoot me. So I left. I left my friend Dickerson, and, of course, this bothered me because I could see him still there rotting, and you know, and nobody finding him. And I was bothered with that all the way through the rest of the war and for years afterwards. But that, things like that happen. Eventually in life you come to the realization that ... there’s little you can do to change the course of your life, much less the course of someone else’s life. And had it been me, I’m sure he would have had the same emotions, but he would have carried on.

But I noticed a distinct ... difference in my attitude. I absolutely cared little. I never again said, “Yes, sir” to an officer. Never. I said, “Yes, lieutenant.” “Yes, captain.” “Yes, major,” but never, never, “yes sir.” I always used the—and this is strictly legal, but you’ve got to know it before you can get by with it. So I used this. The rest of the time I was a soldier I used it. .... Because I felt that someone was responsible for the death of my friend and what better than to pick on a lieutenant or captain or somebody who had absolutely nothing to do with it, but to they’re the nearest son-of-a-bitches that you can find, so that’s the ones you pick on. (Laughter) And ... shortly afterward, well, not shortly afterward, quite and while after that, I know it was my fault that a young lieutenant from the Fourth Cavalry got killed with his crew. ... But that was my attitude. I really did not care much for the war. I did not care much for my life, I did not care much for other people, I withdrew, I became more emerged ... sunk into my reading and my thoughts, and I kindly withdrew from .... I probably, you would probably call it a post-traumatic syndrome, some bullshit, they got a name for it. But I’m sure that’s what it was. But we still had to fight the war.

So we went to Havre—back to where we were relieved. We were relieved ... by the Fifth Division, the Fifth Infantry. It's ironic, but I always felt guilty about that, too. I had a habit—once we moved into a position, I would take hand grenades and go out and strap one to a tree and take a little wire and run over to another tree, and if you walked by and hit that wire it would pull the pin out and the hand grenade would go out. I would do that. I would take a mortar round and dig a little hole and have the, just the fuse on top where somebody would step on it, and I would do that strictly for self preservation. I never did it to defend the American morality or values or the, I did it because it defended me. It kept me alive, see? And in Normandy, when the Fifth Division relieved us at a place called ... on top of that mountain ... what's the name of it? Ah, Caumont.

ROMEISER: Caumont.

FRANKLIN: Caumont. I pronounced it wrong. But ... when the Fifth Division—I've never told anybody about the booby traps I had out in front of us, and I'm sure the Americans that moved in there walked into my damn booby traps, you know, and I felt bad about that. Well, the Fifth Division relieves us six months later up ... on the way to the Ruhr. And ... again I left booby traps, and again I felt bad about, but what the hell. You know, you can't ... shoulder your life with the responsibility of the whole world. Eventually you gotta say, "Well, at least they kept me alive," and that's all that's important. You come to that conclusion. And that's cold and that's unrealistic and it's untrue, but yet it is true. In the final analysis, the only son-of-a-bitch that's worth living, worth saving is you. And that's what it comes to. And that's not a pleasant thought to have, particularly as you grow older and you have children, and they have children and you see the ... imperfection of your attitude. Perhaps that is not grammatically stated, but that's the way it is. So ...

ROMEISER: Ben, can I ask, interrupt here a minute. When you came into Germany ... you crossed into Germany, this was I guess in September of '44.

FRANKLIN: Mm hmm.

ROMEISER: What were you told to expect in terms of the civilian population?

FRANKLIN: Nothing.

ROMEISER: And what was your first encounter with civilians? And how that, how did it go? And how did they receive you, and how did you treat them?

FRANKLIN: They were ... when we first moved into Germany, they were extremely fearful of us. Yeah. But every—when we took a little village, unless it was defended heavily by the German Army, and when we went unopposed, they all put out white sheets, but they would not come out of their houses. When we went into their houses to live, they went to the basement, you know, and they stayed out of our way. They were very reluctant to offend us in any way. ... Still on occasion some of them walked up and down the street as though nothing was happening. You know, the Germans would put in artillery or something, and they didn't seem to worry so



much about it. They seemed to be ... pretty accustomed to war. They were that way. There was one incident in ... Aachen where my platoon, and I say my platoon because I was the one to directly lay in the indirect fire. ... I gone to Cannon Company and—while we were in England I had their instrument sergeant to teach me how to use a QE and to get mass ... clearance and how to fire and observe it and adjust it. And I had to learn that. So when the, our guns—we laid our four guns in a battery to fire indirect fire, I was the one that directed the fire. Well, there was a crossroad—we were in apartment houses ... up on the second floor, and you could see this crossroad. You could see part of the village coming down here and then it went under a hill, you couldn't see it, and then you saw a road going up that way and you could only pick it up halfway up. So I looked out there one day, and there was traffic—people walking up that road. So I told Jim we should lay fire on it. He said, "Okay, lay the guns in and we'll throw some lead out there." And we did. And we fired four guns, all four machine guns. Maybe three or four boxes each. But I could see the tracers hitting into the civilians and they just scattered, you know, they panicked, which is a normal thing. And later I thought, "Well, I'm sure they were all civilians." Number one, they were too close together to be soldiers. Soldiers have enough sense to separate themselves, so they had to be—plus, the colors of their clothing were different from the German blue/grey uniform so I realized we had ... just deliberately slaughtered, that I had deliberately slaughtered these civilians. But you've got—how do I say it? You can't dwell on the fact that you have done something inhuman because then ... it becomes too overwhelming, you know. You've got to justify every damned action. Well, the son-of-a-bitches shouldn't have been there to start with. That's the best justification. They should have been some place else. Okay, so you dismiss it.

... But the people themselves, on rare occasions did they ever show any animosity or hatred toward us. On rare occasion, the German people. They knew they had been beaten. There was not question in their mind that they were defeated, and they know we are the ones who defeated them. They knew that, so they accepted it. And it was their only way out. It was either accept defeat or die. You know, that was their choice, and they didn't want to die, of course, they didn't. And anyway, most of them—the children, the women, old woman, and old men, all the young people were gone, you know, they had nine million casualties. Now you take nine million of the young people out of Germany—at that time the population was probably sixty-five million, and you've taken most of their youth and their young ones and all here and there and everything .... So the people left were strictly the old feeble and those ill-equipped to handle war. And they did not, we did not have like they're having in Iraq now, they did not have any ... insurgents.

ROMEISER: Insurgents.

FRANKLIN: So back to 9 November, 9 December. That's were we left off. We can take a break here.

DENTON: Sure.

ROMEISER: You know, and I'm not ...

DENTON: Pause this?

ROMEISER: Yeah.

(Tape Paused)

DENTON: Okay.

FRANKLIN: The heroes have gone home. The rest of us are offered ... three to seven day leave to Paris. At that time, I very rarely wrote home. But, at that time I got mail—well, I hadn't had any in two or three months. And I had an uncle who was in the air force, and he was down at a place called Jarny, France. And my mother said, "If you get an opportunity," you know—like I could do whatever I wanted to do, "go visit him and see how he is doing." So I did. Rather than go to Paris, I told the company commander. He let me have a Jeep and a driver, drove me down, and then seven days later they were supposed to come down and pick me up and take me back. Now this is down—Jarny is not too far from Metz in France. I go down there, he is in the 365<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron of the 370<sup>th</sup> Fighter Group, some other mucksmix number, you know, and I'd think, "What bullshit," you know. He is a sheet metal man in a P-47 squadron. When the planes would come back they had holes in 'em, they'd cut out a little piece of metal and put up there and take a rivet, I guess, or some way you could ... cover up the hole. That was his job. So I got there and ... course he had no idea what the infantry did. You know, the concept of "What the hell you doing in the goddamned infantry?" You know, "You're stupid ...." But they had tents and they had folding cots, and they had blankets. Now we're talking big time stuff, you know. Big—we're in heaven ...

DENTON: It's a luxury hotel. (Laughter)

FRANKLIN: Yeah. And, of course, the weather's bad, cold and everything. And we went to a little bar and had a few drinks and everything, come home and I got in the bed. And a bell started ringing. Everybody jumped up and I could hear an airplane. You could tell a German 80—87, their motors were not synchronized. A two-engine American plane you can't tell—it sounds like one engine, but with the German plane for some reason they go *ough ough ough ough ough*. The motors didn't work together ... and I'd heard this through Africa and Sicily, and I'm very familiar with it—flew over the base and all these sons-of-bitches jumped up and run outside and get in holes, and I think they're crazy. (Laughter) You don't leave a damned warm bed over a fucking airplane, you know. That son-of-a-bitch can't see what's going on. (Laughter) And they thought I was crazy. They'd come back and, "What's with you? You could get killed!" And I thought, "My God! What the hell am I doing messing with these people?" And I never forget how superior I felt to those people. Now here I am a stupid little sergeant in the infantry and I'm feeling superior to other people. And a stupid little sergeant in the infantry is just about as low on the totem pole as you can get. (Laughs) You're not superior to anybody, you know. But I felt superior. Number one, I'm not leaving a warm bed just because a goddamned airplane is flying over the top. I don't care if he bombs the whole base, I'm not getting out of this warm bed, you know. And that—to them they thought, "Well, that son-of-a-bitch is really crazy." (Laughter)

Anyway, I didn't go to Paris. So luckily, or unluckily, the company commander's driver, or one of the other drivers, I don't know which one, he came down and got me a day early, and we went back to ... Havre in Belgium. And I guess the next day is when the Bulge started. Well, I'm telling everybody about these damned Air Corps people that have hot chow, you go through the line they're frying eggs, and you can have toast, and you can have jelly, and they're not believing it, you know. "Oh, Ben, you're bullshitting." I said, "No, I'm not. Them son-of-bitches live high on the hog, boy!" (Laughter) And they didn't believe me. Anyway, we ... got word that the Bulge had started on the sixteenth [of December], and I'd say I probably got back maybe the fourteenth or fifteenth, and I don't remember when. And I don't even remember how long I had been back. But, I didn't go to Paris, and a lot of our people were still in Paris. So we loaded up the next day and went by truck into ... the area where the Germans had broke through, and that's probably—this is late, in retrospect—this is probably the greatest ... miscalculation of enemy's capabilities any American Army has ever made. We had to be the most poorly officered army of all time, other than the Italian Army. The Italian Army was perhaps a little poorly officered than ours. But the non-coms weren't that hot either. (Laughter) So you know, I was a non-com, so I've got to share some of the responsibility. But to think we had air superiority, we was flying over Germany all the time, and the Germans moved fifty-seven divisions from the Russian front all the way across Germany, and bushwhacked them, and fueled them and got them ready for, without us knowing it. How could that possibly happen? But it did happen, yeah. So when we went into position—and again we went directly north. And you know, you go by the sun and you had compasses and you [say], "What the hell are we going north for? The Germans are directly east here." But we went north and we come down and got into a position because we didn't know it, but most people think that the Germans tried to break straight through the line to go and capture Paris, or some bullshit, but that is not true. Their object was to break through the forest, swing to the north, take the city of Antwerp where all of our supplies were coming in, separate the British and the American Armies, drive a wedge between them, and Bastogne and those other places were unimportant to the German Army. So they put the American Army—somebody had some sense, took the most experienced divisions they had, and they put [them] on the north shoulder of the Bulge, which was at Robertville, Belgium. Now this consisted of the Eighty-Second Airborne, the First Infantry, the Second Infantry, the Fourth Infantry—all the experienced divisions they put there, because they knew the Germans were turning north, and they needed to be blocked. Further, they put us under command of General Montgomery, probably the best defensive general in World War II. So he was in command. And I hear people talking about—I hear [Bill] O'Reilly, this son-of-a-bitch on television, talking about, "You don't want to put American troops under the command of foreign officers." Thank God we had enough sense that we were placed under command of foreign officers in World War II.

So my position—and now reduce it from the grand strategic picture down to a machine gun section, two guns. My position was on top of the high ground. We tried to dig in, it's so hard, the ground was so hard that we had trouble digging in, but we dug and we had enough sense to keep digging. And then down below, maybe four hundred yards in front of us, was a road running parallel, and we could hear the German tanks run up and down this road at night time, you know. And, of course, we had outposts. We had outposts out. And two or three of our outposts got captured. We didn't know what happened to them. ... But from that we knew that if they're that active, they're getting ready to come. And so one morning we woke up and, after we had been there a couple or three days, woke up and there was—it was foggy, and fifty yards

in front of us, was these big Mark-6 tanks. And So there was little we could do except fire. We—from our defensive position, we fired and fired and fired because they had infantry behind them, you see.

DENTON: Well, did you have any anti-tank ...

FRANKLIN: No.

DENTON: ... equipment.

FRANKLIN: No.

DENTON: Okay.

FRANKLIN: No. Not soon enough for Mark 6. Even if we did, we couldn't get to the flank of a Mark-6 to hit him, see? And hitting it head on was a waste of time. But we did have artillery, thank God. You know, the one great thing about the American Army, say what you want to, but we do have great artillery and great artillery officers. Most of the casualties inflicted on the enemies of the American Army is, as a result of our good artillery. I remember in Africa when—as a young sergeant, if you spotted a tank out in front, you called your platoon leader, who called the company commander, who called the battalion commander by EE-8 radio, who called the division, and they would direct some unit to fire at a certain coordinate. But by the time we got into Germany in '44, a sergeant could pick up the phone and say, "We've got enemy tanks so and so and so and so," and it went through a fire direction center someplace—people with brains enough to add two and two, you know, to figure out things. The next thing you know, three or four battalions of artillery would be hitting that point, you know. That's how good we become, and that's what saved us in the Bulge. It was not the infantry, it was not the tanks, 'cause we couldn't use our tanks, we couldn't get them in position because of snow. And I'll tell you why—another fallacy of the American Army. The American tank has pads, a rubber pad. The German tank did not have a rubber tank, a rubber pad. Now this is good in one way and the other way it's not good. If a battalion of German tanks go through a village and turn right at a crossroad, they dig up the road and you end up with a great big hole where they turned. A battalion of American tanks go through there with those rubber pads, they just turn and they do very little. Most of veteran tanks units had enough sense to unscrew one bolt—'cause only one bolt had a pad on it. But there's, I don't know how many pads on a track, but I'd say there are sixty or seventy, you know, and so it's quite an operation to take those off. ... So ... most of the experienced units would take those pads off so they could run in snow and ice and things, but most of them—lots of them didn't. They didn't even bother to do it, so they couldn't get into position. They'd come up to a little hill that you want to go on top of, and they stand and they started going backward, you know. So it's another problem. It's a problem in that all units do not learn on the same scale. Some units learn and have officers smart enough to accept the fact that we are not perfect and we should adapt some of the things the enemy has, and on the other hand you have people who don't. Go ahead.

DENTON: Let me ...

----- END SIDE ONE, TAPE ONE -----

ROMEISER: How long before your rank was restored?

FRANKLIN: ... Sometime between Havre, the rest area ...

ROMEISER: Right.

FRANKLIN: No, maybe at the rest area.

ROMEISER: The rest area.

FRANKLIN: Yeah.

ROMEISER: Okay.

FRANKLIN: 'Cause when I went to visit my uncle, I was a staff sergeant.

ROMEISER: Staff sergeant.

FRANKLIN: Yeah.

ROMEISER: That's where you were before? You were ... a staff sergeant.

FRANKLIN: Yeah.

ROMESIER: Okay.

FRANKLIN: But then see ... your company commander could promote you or demote you.

ROMEISER: Right.

FRANKLIN: Later, like now or later in life ... when I became a sergeant major with a permanent grade of sergeant major, it took an almost an act of Congress to bust ya ...

ROMEISER: Oh wow.

FRANKLIN: ... or to promote you either one, you know. Because they—but then, they had what they called temporary grade. Anybody promoted in the war was temporary. Now they could go, you could go back, you could have a permanent—like a officer who graduated from West Point in 1939 as a second lieutenant, well his permanent grade would be second lieutenant, but he may go up to lieutenant colonel as a temporary.

ROMEISER: Yeah.

FRANKLIN: And they can reduce him back to permanent grade anytime they want to.

ROMEISER: Oh, I see.

FRANKLIN: But they can't reduce a permanent grade officer or non-com. So I would think that it was pretty close to ... it might even happen after the Hurtgen, I don't remember. It was not that important, you know. ... Jim ... Bottomley was just one of those people that you didn't bullshit, you know. He told you what to do and you never, never open your mouth and contradict what he said, you just kept quiet and went on about your business and did it. Now you ready again, son?

DENTON: Yeah. Yeah.

FRANKLIN: Now where did we leave off?

DENTON: You were on the north ...

ROMEISER and DENTON: ... on the Bulge.

FRANKLIN: ... on the Bulge. "T" Company, the company where I was stationed, patrolled into Malmedy and St. Vith, which was directly in front of it, from ten thousand yards away. Now there are—cut that off 'til I finish this ...

DENTON: Sure.

(Tape Paused)

DENTON: First, I want to ask you ... when you went into the Bulge, the weather was notorious for being one of the coldest winters ...

FRANKLIN: Say again?

DENTON: The weather, during the Bulge was notorious for being one of the coldest winters that they've had in a long time. Can you tell me a little bit about what you experienced—how you were equipped ... when you went in there?

FRANKLIN: Hmm. They had just—our equipment—the only difference in our equipment in the Bulge than otherwise, was up until the Bulge we had shoes and leggings. Well, maybe in Havre, just before the Bulge, maybe even a little before that, we got what was called a combat boot. And it was not a boot like the airborne had that laced all the way up, it laced up half way and then it buckled on the side. It had two buckles on the side, which was an improvement over the leggings because you had to lace the leggings so tight that it cut off the circulation to the feet, and we—it was a good thing that we got rid of those. The boot itself, if you took a—what we called ... cosmo ... it was a grease that you packed weapons in. And it started with and it wasn't cosmo, but it was a—had a simple name. It was a special thick grease. If you took grease and put it on your boot, it made it waterproof and air-proof. It acted as an insulator. Well, we all had enough sense to do that.

And then, when we left Havre, we already had snow on the ground. ... In fact, we had eight or ten inches of snow, and we went by truck from Havre up to ... Robertville was the nearest big town to where we were at the, in the Bulge. Then, it seemed we had snow ... often, it snowed often. It ended up that we probably had drifts of four feet ... deep. Just around our holes we had three feet of snow. Because if you dig down about that much then the ground was soft you could dig it, but the first six or eight inches was frozen and it was very difficult to get through that. But then a few rounds come in, you'd be surprised how many people can dig, you know? (Laughter) How many people can dig—it encourages you to dig. So we had good holes. We all dug good protective holes. Then the dirt that you throw out mounds up, then snow on top of that. The only problem was sleeping. Unlike in a rifle squad where one man and another man dig a trench and you—one sleeps and the other one stays awake because you have fifty-percent alert at all times—in machine guns, you have seven men to—supposedly in the best of circumstances—you have seven men on one gun. But at this time, we probably had three on one and four on the other. But you only need one man awake, so that means two men could sleep. If you had four men, you had one man awake and three men could sleep. You know what I mean. And then one gets up and you still—now, we dig what is called a “U” trench. It comes back here and the gunner stands back here and shoots and the ... ammunition man is here, and this one over here is pulling the belt through. So—over on this side—so you had two trenches here and one trench here where someone can sleep. And the man that is awake, he's up at the back of the gun sitting in a little saddle that he creates for himself, and he stays awake. Otherwise, if the son-of-a-bitch lays down and sleeps, nobody's awake. Everybody will go to sleep. So we had an advantage there. Still, it was so cold and so miserable that you needed to hug another person to get warm, and we had a lot of frostbite. A lot of people had frostbite. I didn't because I had a little more experience, you know. And in the long run, the more experience you had, the—your chances of survival is better, not lessened. You know, if you went by numerical chances it would be less, but that's not true.

DENTON: Right.

ROMEISER: Yeah.

FRANKLIN: It's a—knowledge goes a long way. So the weather was terrible, absolutely terrible. Thank God, because had it been open and bright, these German tanks would have run right over us and took off to the north. I don't know of any way we could have stopped 'em. But on the other hand, had it been open and bright, we would have had air power. So it's hard to say which was the best. As it was, it was not as bad as it could have been. I've been in worse positions than the Bulge. And then in—sometime in January, latter part of January, we—the orders come down get ready we are gonna start advancing. And we did not stop—we started advancing, and we did not stop for long until we get to the ... Ruhr River. And I remember the plans change everyday. Okay, Third Battalion is gonna use a footbridge. We take elements of the Third Battalion and we build a footbridge with some engineers across and everything. Next day, no, no, no, Third Battalion is gonna go by assault boat, and Second Battalion is gonna go by—and they went through this bullshit.

DENTON: Yeah.

FRANKLIN: And we're dragging up boats one day and the next day we're trying to get ready to go across on a footbridge, but first we got to establish a bridgehead on the other side of the river. Although the Ruhr is small, it had the capacity of water from dams that they had built up. And the fear was that they would blow up these dams and a big wall of water would gush down and wash us all away. That was a big fear which we weren't that familiar with. We weren't, we didn't, we weren't that concerned. But we stayed on the bank for maybe a week. And we enjoyed staying there. Of course, the Germans would shell across and we'd send a patrol across, and they'd get shot up and the next night another patrol would go over until finally they got enough riflemen—only riflemen, no machine guns to go across—first, I got to stop here and explain to you. You have a light machine gun in the fourth squad of every rifle platoon. You do not have a heavy machine gun in a rifle company. You have a platoon of heavy machine guns attached to that rifle company, but primarily they are not used as an offensive weapon ... which means the difference in living a dying, you know, because normally you get killed in three different positions. One, you're on a patrol, or most people never hear about it, two gets killed today, three tomorrow and so on until accumulated, it amounts to a lot. Or you're killed in an assault where you expose your chest and you had nothing but a rifle to go ... or you get killed by artillery or mines or something indirect. Machine guns are subjected to artillery and occasionally a tank will come up and shoot at you, but not very often.

But a rifleman, he has three types of patrols. You have a recon patrol, which means that some son-of-a-bitch back at regimental headquarters that works for the Colonel in the S-2 Section. The Colonel says, "Captain, who's in front of us out there?" And the captain says, "I'll get right back to you, sir." So he calls down to I Company, "Richmond send out a patrol and find out who's in front of you." So Richmond calls down to his first platoon or second platoon, "Jones, get across that river and find out who's over there." So they send five or six men over there, two or three of them get killed, and they come back and they say, "Well, they've got machine guns, they've got mortars, they've got this." (Laughs) And that's called a recon patrol. Occasionally, they will capture a prisoner and bring him back, and then they have what is called a combat patrol where you go across to destroy positions that the enemy occupies and capture people so that you know what unit is there. And then you have a contact patrol. Now a contact patrol is your company, is on this hill, and B Company is on this hill, and you run contact patrols between the two. Sometimes you're a mile apart, sometimes you're only two hundred yards apart. But every four—two to four hours, a patrol leaves here and goes over here, and the next two hours a patrol leaves here and goes over here. That's called a contact patrol. Occasionally you get casualties from this, either from your own people shooting them—you know, you got a new man, he hears somebody out in front and he shoots them, and he opens fire—it happened to be your own people—or an enemy will come in between ...

DENTON: ... break the line ...

FRANKLIN: ... that line and they will weigh-lay ya. They'll wait for that patrol to come and they'll shoot ya. So that's where you had most of your casualties, not as most people think. They see movies on television of these Marines and them soldiers running bravely—straightforward bullshit, you know. So we got to the Ruhr and after a few days, we eventually affected a crossing. We got across the Ruhr. And then for some reason, and I don't know



why—now, from the Bulge to the Ruhr was a fairly constant movement forward until we got to the Ruhr and then we were stable for at least a week. Maybe longer I don't remember because, you know, what happens when you're stable is you sleep a lot. And, you know, one day kinda goes into another day and even with someone with a good memory like I've got ... I can't tell you exactly how long we stayed someplace.

And then, once we got across the Ruhr we constantly moved in the attack. It seemed we never stopped. If we would stop for a couple hours the next thing you know we had tanks and we're moving again, and we would go this way or that way and come back. It was always moving. And I remember one night we took the city of Bonn—which later become the capital of Germany. And it seemed that we were just walk—going along and ... we were walking on foot, but we had tanks in a column. And fortunately, I later learned—this is first hand—I didn't know it at the time, but we we're walking at night and we had M-10 tank destroyers with us, and they had the long 90 mm gun with the flash dispenser on the front. And a German battalion was moving west on the other side of the road, and they saw these M-10 tanks, M-10 tank destroyers, and they thought we were Germans. Well, we thought that they were Germans, and that we're gonna leave them alone, 'cause they're not bothering us and we're not gonna bother them. We just kept on moving, and we moved into Bonn ... went down the hill all the way to the river—took key road junctions, took everything, and this battalion of Germans that was going the other way run upon some American unit back there and got the hell kicked out of it, or kicked the hell out of it. But that actually happened. That's in regimental history, that we actually passed ...

DENTON: Just side by side ...

FRANKLIN: ... each other at night time.

DENTON: How close were you to ...

FRANKLIN: Ten yards.

DENTON: Wow!

FRANKLIN: Yeah, just a, you know, a normal street. Of course, we could tell they were Germans.

DENTON: Wow. (Laughter)

FRANKLIN: We could actually tell that they're—they thought that we were Germans, we were a German unit because of our tanks, our M-10 tank destroyers, but if we had the Sherman tank or ...

DENTON: ... they would have known right ...

FRANKLIN: Or even if we had the Pershing tank ...

DENTON: Mm hmm.

FRANKLIN: ... which is a later version of the Sherman ...

DENTON: Yeah.

FRANKLIN: If we'd had it, they would have been able to see that we weren't ... then we moved down and we took Bonn, the town, the city of Bonn. And they blew the bridges and we sat there. And next thing you know, we got orders to move down the Remagen. Now this is my best part, one of the best parts of war for me. We moved down by truck and tank. We moved down, didn't walk. I don't remember how far, thirty or forty miles, I'm sure, down to a little town of Remagen where they had a bridge that was captured by the Ninth Armored Division—going across it. And boy, shit was just going across that bridge. Well, they piddled around and piddled around. Finally, they told the I Company to occupy, move into these buildings and get in the cellars, and so we did. And then I moved into a—with my section guns, I moved into a little hotel that had a wine cellar. (Laughter) So they come out—word come down that we had a very low priority, which meant that we weren't scheduled to go across the bridge too quick. They was trying to get tanks across there, see? So I thought, "Hell, you know. This wine cellar's here and we've been humping for a long time, so let's enjoy it." So we did. We drank wine and had fun, and looked out the window and they started building a—First Engineer Battalion started building a pontoon bridge across the Rhine. The big bridge is here and the pontoon is gonna be here and we're in a little hotel here. So we can look out the basement window and see what was going on. Well, they'd get out about fifty yards and the Germans would come over with an airplane and bomb it and artillery would hit them, and we would cheer. 'Cause we weren't too excited about completing that damn bridge. (Laughter) We knew we would have to get across—the longer they screwed up on that bridge, the longer we got to stay in this hotel.

DENTON: Right.

FRANKLIN: So I would say ... and again, memory .... I would say it was a week, at least a week we were there, maybe not, maybe five days. But we drank all the wine in the cellar, we tore up the damn restaurant, we tore up the whole thing, shit in the floor. You know, just any bad thing that you could do, we did. Then we crossed the Rhine across the footbridge. We went across, and from then on we went wide open. We had attached to us, the Fourth Recon Squadron, or battalion. Yeah, whatever it was. They had M-8 recon cars. That was a car with eight wheels—five or six wheels on each side, a little turret with a 37 mm on a tank. It wasn't worth a damn, but for recon it's good 'cause they're very fast. We moved all the way across to Kassel—the town of Kassel. And I remember Kassel—we had a little firefight there. Occasionally, we would run up on the enemy and they would take us under fire, and we would stop and the people in the recon car would call back and next thing you know, artillery's coming in and occasionally some tanks would come up and ... the infantry—we didn't have to do much—if you're ... honest, it was not a very unpleasant time compared to other times: the Hurtgen Forest and so on. Then we get to Kassel and they tell us we're gonna have to go through the Harz Mountains and we knew that would be difficult. So we go in the Harz Mountains and take a little town called Osterode, a little town called Braunlage, and we go on toward Jena, and Gera, and so on ... but we're going in these very heavily wooded area where this lieutenant from the Fourth Recon—he's in the middle of the road, and we are on—we got

one squad of guns on this side and another squad of guns on this side in the woods. And, you know, when you build a road it's flat, but if the woods—if a finger of the woods come down, you've got to walk up and you've got to go down, and it's harder to walk in the woods than the ... well, he needed flank protection because at that time the Germans would put one man with a *panzerfaust*—a little anti-tank weapon...

DENTON: Yeah.

FRANKLIN: ... and he let something come right up to him and he'd knock it out. So that's what we were there for. And the—they got stopped, and I'm pissed off, I'm tired, you know, I am. And we stopped and the only time I was ever directly insubordinate to an officer in the American Army, because I know they're—they're trying to do the best they can do, you know, but I was just irritable. And he stopped and he called me over and he said, "Sergeant," said, "we're gonna have to speed it up," said, "I'm a damn sitting duck here going this slow." And I said, we told him—we turned—"We're walking. We're carrying goddamned guns and ammo. We can't go on over ... you're on your ass sitting here." And he said, "Sergeant, you're gonna have to speed it up," and I said, "Fuck you." (Laughter) That's the first time I've ever done that. And he said, "I'm gonna report you to your company commander," and I said, "Fuck you. I don't care." And I went back to the troops and I told them what I said, and they said, "Let's sit down and wait." And I said, "No, we're gonna keep walking." So we kept walking. We didn't go a hundred and fifty yards 'til we topped a little hill, and sure enough a tank hit him ...

ROMEISER: Wow.

FRANKLIN: ... just knocked the whole crew out, you know. Good for me because he didn't report it to my Company Commander, you know.

DENTON: Yeah. (Laughter)

FRANKLIN: Bad for him, but he didn't. But then we went on through the Hurtgen and when we got to Gera—my wife's hometown by the way—they loaded us up in trucks and they took us—after we took Gera, we moved to down to Hoff. And we took Hoff, then some tanks joined us and we're now part of Patton's Third Army and we go into Czechoslovakia. We go through Selb ... we're going through, we're going toward the main road from Prague .... Bad—something, I forget the name of it. Anyway, the war ends, that's where the war ends. And it's strange, but I remember exactly my thoughts at the time it ended. And we were told early in the morning—had two guns on a bridge, a little bridge over just a little small stream, and my job was to hold that bridge. So word come down that the war was over and I thought, you know, "What the hell do we do now?" You know, "What the hell are we gonna do?" 'Cause I'd been fighting since age seventeen, and I'm now twenty years old and I just couldn't imagine a world without a war, you know. So I went down to the creek and sat down there for a while and I re-thought—well, "I have no idea what you're gonna do. You don't wanna go back home," you know, "you don't want go back riding a bicycle for a grocery store. (Laughter) After all you've been in command of troops ..."

DENTON: Yeah.

FRANKLIN: "... you've had positions of power,"—perhaps not ... great but some power. [I thought], "And you're not educated, you're not smart. You're a dumb son-of-a-bitch and this is just about all you're good for what you're doing here." And I thought well, "Maybe I might just stay in the army and maybe we'll have another war, and I'll be ... have something to do." So suddenly ... about 10,000 Germans come—we got word down, they're coming, the Germans are coming. ... Disarm them, put them in a field, secure it, feed them if you can. So we become instead of soldiers killing people, we suddenly become soldiers helping soldiers. You know, getting food and so on. So we put them all in a field and they're there and then there's nothing to do. Yeah, go ahead.

DENTON: How was that emotionally for you to adjust from being in a mode of war and then going to basically babysitting these prisoners? How did that make you feel?

FRANKLIN: Yeah. In the beginning, when it first happened ...

DENOTN: Mm hmm.

FRANKLIN: ... they were no longer in combat status and they were now a mock mixed bunch of worthless people—it was a shock because now I could sleep and ... before you slept from exhaustion. You know, you're so tired you go to sleep. Now you're not that tired. You're not doing anything, you know. Nobody's threatening you and you can lay down on your blanket against a tree or what ... you can sleep. And also, you—then you realize, you start realizing how inhumane war is, you know, you look at the—there was women ... German women soldiers in this column—the first column that came. They had their tanks, they had their officers, they had our officers come up to the frontline and they went out and shook hands and saluted and all this shit, and handed pistols and I'm thinking, "Damn, yesterday we was killing the son-of-bitches. Today, officer to officer, they're royalty to royalty," you know. (Laughs)

Then we put them in the field and ... brought a water truck up from the regiment, or battalion some place, and food and the doctors come up with medical people, and all these people out in the field. And we're just—I put a gun at each corner of the field. So that I let them know that if they tried to run, we're gonna kill them. So [we] didn't have any trouble, they didn't try to run. And then word come up, "Russian trucks will be here at six o'clock in the morning." And I thought, you know, I didn't know anything about the agreement between the Russian and the Americans. This concept was above me, and I thought, "Oh, Okay. So Russian trucks are gonna be here. I don't give a shit." (Laughter) So somebody told me, said, "You know, we should tell these prisoners that." And I said, "Why?" And they said, "Well, why do you think these people come and surrender to us? They don't want to be captured by the Russians. That's why they came all the way over to Karlsbad"—near Karlsbad far away. [They said], "They come over to surrender from Prague. They come over to surrender." And I said, "Well, that's not my problem, that's their problem." And he said, "We should at least tell them." So I said, "Well, I'll tell a few of them and see what happens." So he went and told a few, and he come back and the fella was just another soldier ...

DENTON: Mm hmm.

FRANKLIN: ... and he come back and then he says, “Well, they are afraid if they try to run away that we’ll shoot them.” And I said, “You go tell them that we’re all gonna sleep tonight.” (Laughter) “We’re all gonna go to sleep tonight, they won’t be shot.” So I told the gunners to go to sleep, forget it. And next morning, I bet you ten of them didn’t run. The next morning, it looked like nobody had run. And sure enough the trucks were there and we loaded them up on the trucks. Russian soldiers kicked their ass and treated—we loaded up about fifty to a truck. It looked like sardines and they drove off—women officers, soldiers and that was it.

And so we messed around for a few more days, I don’t remember very much about it, and then we moved back to a place called Bamberg in Germany. We stayed in Bamberg ... over a week, maybe two weeks. Then we moved down to Schweinfurt. Now Schweinfurt was a town that was heavily bombed by American troops because they had ball bearing factories in Schweinfurt, and we had reason to try to destroy those factories. So it was a well-demolished town, and we took over a school building and we lived in the school building—everybody got drunk. (Laughter) Everybody just—we just kindly quit. We absolutely were an undisciplined mob. ... They were just—there wasn’t nothing to do, we weren’t interested in anything. Then it was my time to go home and I came home for thirty-nine days and I re-enlisted before I came home.

ROMEISER: Hmm.

FRANKLIN: So when I went back to the regiment—while I was gone, the regiment split up. They moved—the regimental headquarters moved down to a place called Landshut and each company moved in a different position. And so I was put—instead of going back to my old company, I looked out at—saw a major had a flag where each company was, and I saw one stuck way out by itself and I said, “What’s that?” He said, “E Company.” I said, “I want to go to E Company.” So I went to the E Company then. And there, if you’ve got—you got time?

ROMEISER: Yeah.

DENTON: Yeah. I was just checking ...

FRANKLIN: ... The reason I’m telling you this—we are now an occupying army. And I want to tell you the thoughts of an occupying soldier. All these years that I have been fighting the Germans, I had learned to hate the German soldier. I had never learned to hate the German civilians. And now the first thing they do to me as a Staff Sergeant is give me twelve men and send me out to a little place called Ering that had a dam on the end river with a foot path over the top. And what was happening when the war ended—a lot of Austrians were in Germany, and a lot of Germans were in Austria, and so they were trying to get back to their families—men, women, and children. Well my orders were to put guards there and permit nobody to go across that bridge unless they had permission from a man named Captain [Henry A.] Kissinger who later became Secretary of State. And he was ... from Germany and he lived outside the little town of Hof in a villa, and every Friday I had to go report to him. Also on every Friday the company sent me food and drinks for my troops. But when I first moved there there hadn’t been any Americans there before. I had permission—a letter in German from Kissinger authorizing me to kick anybody out of their homes with just what they had on their backs, any place I wanted

to. So I took two big houses. One close to the river and the other in toward the center of the village, and kicked the people out and the woman ... in the house that I wanted close to the river as my house, her name was Zimmerman. And she spoke some English, and she was a lady from Munich, and she had married a contractor and they had built this home together, and he was in Russia as a prisoner, her son was killed in Normandy, and her daughter was killed riding a train to Munich ...

DENTON: Hmm.

FRANKLIN: ... an American fighter plane .... And she told me, “If you want me out of here, kill me because I’m not leaving.” She said, “You’ve killed my son, you’ve killed my daughter, my husband is in Russia, but if he ever gets free, he’ll find me here or I will not be alive.” And I said, “Frau Zimmerman, you’re a very brave woman because I might just kill ya.” But, I had to admire her courage.

DENTON: Mm hmm.

FRANKLIN: I said, “How would you like to stay as my assistant?” She said, “I’ll stay regardless of what I gotta do.” I said, “Okay. You’ve got to prepare the meals for twelve men, you’ve gotta be in charge of the girls to clean up the rooms and everything, and you’ll be in charge. And anything that happens to the civilians, you handle it or bring it to me.” So I was in charge of the village. I was in charge of the bridge, and this is where being an occupier goes to your head. Suddenly you’ve got power in your hands, not over your kind, but another kind. Every girl that went across that bridge, if she did not have a pass from Kissinger, gave me some pussy. That was just the basic rule, if not me, one of the troops.

DENTON: Mm hmm.

FRANKLIN: I don’t care what they looked like, what they did, that was just part of the deal. If they wanted to go across they had to pay for it. Anybody coming from Austria, same thing, you know. And this is the power of a little simple sergeant in an occupying troop. You had—and you suddenly realized how powerful you are. Frau Zimmerman and I, we would sit—‘course they brought us whiskey, too, every Friday. They called it “Class Six” in the army.

DENTON: Yeah.

FRANKLIN: And she and I would sit on the balcony overlooking the river, and she tried to make me decent. She tried to make me a human being, you know. (Laughter) “How could you be this way to these young girls,” you know, “how is it possible? Don’t you know there’s an Almighty blah blah blah ....” She became something like a mother to me.

DENTON: Yeah.

FRANKLIN: And—but in spite of this ... occupying power shit corrupts you. But then I stayed with the regiment until ‘48. I went back to the regiment in ‘50 and stayed until ‘57. I went back to the regiment in ‘58 and stayed until ‘63. My love and my home was my regiment. Everything

else in my life was, other than my wife, was superfluous. Then, of course, when I met my wife, and I realized that I had a responsibility to another human being, then I changed my life monetarily.

DENTON: Mm hmm.

FRANKLIN: I no longer threw my money away. I gave it to her to take care of. (Laughs) If not, we wouldn't be able to be eating these sandwiches. We wouldn't have a damn thing if it wasn't for that. (Laughter) But that's the story, that's the end of it.

Now, to sum up, to surmise what all I did in the war, I'm sure it is not unlike what millions of other infantry soldiers did. The problem perhaps ... the problem is that in my case, I was intelligent enough to look back at these acts of cruelty and admit my own guilt—a guilt which cannot be erased by words or deeds or anything else, it's just something that you've gotta live with. How did I do it? I tried to make it as small as possible. I used the old victim ... personality to say, "Well, it was not my fault it, was the lieutenant's fault. It was not my fault, it was the captain's fault. I didn't ask to be put there. I didn't ask to pull this trigger of this gun, I was told to pull the trigger of this gun. So blame that son-of-a-bitch, don't blame me," you know. And that's the only way you can survive and maintain some stability of brain. Otherwise, if you accepted the full responsibility for every inhumane cruel act committed by you, you would end up as a damn criminal. You would face the fact that your conduct for which you were rewarded with medals is no different from this conduct that puts people in prison or the death chamber. They are both identical, except one is sanctioned by government and the other one is disapproved of by the government. And that's the only declaration between the two. And that's—well, that's about as good as I can sum it up. That's ... perhaps that's not an enlightening or original or brilliant, but it's how I managed to get by. Now ...

DENTON: Well, I'd like to go back ... I'm curious about your interactions with the Russians.

FRANKLIN: My interactions with the Russians?

DENTON: Did you interact with them? What was your impression of them as a people and as soldiers?

FRANKLIN: Well, I've got to go—rewind a little bit.

DENTON: Okay.

FRANKLIN: In 1946, at the—in November of '46, my regiment was split up. One battalion went to ... Vienna and one battalion—the battalion that I was assigned to at that time, the Second Battalion, went to Salzburg and the people who fought into the war in the Third Battalion had to go to Berlin. Well, I had fought in the Third Battalion, so although my company commander wanted to keep me in E Company, the Second Battalion, and I wanted to stay in the Second Battalion to go to Salzburg, they forced me to go to Berlin. And the reason they did—we were taking over a regiment, the Sixth Infantry Regiment, and they wanted combat veterans of the Sixteenth Infantry to take over that regiment because ... they thought that there would be some

discourse and some opposition, but, ... Colonel Wolf he was a major at that time—a former company commander ... him, myself, and a couple of other sergeants went to Berlin. We got to Berlin and I went back into my old company, M Company as a section sergeant, back to where—going back to where I was when we went to Paris, you know. This is about as good as I was capable of being. And I was still a bad boy, doing bad things and ... they wanted a man—they had what they called the Allied Control Authority Ball, which meant the British Commander, the Russian Commander, the French Commander, and the American Commander would meet at the Allied Control Authority Building—they broke Berlin up into four districts, see?

DENTON: Mm hmm.

FRANKLIN: And they would meet and they would have a ball and a dance for the high-ranking dignitaries of each nation. Well all the other Generals would have a personal guard and General [Lucius] Clay did not have a personal guard. So they sent me to be his personal guard simply because I was tall and straight and looked good in uniform. That's the only reason and I can't think of any other reason other than my foreign decoration. So I went and all I did was stand behind his chair the whole evening at parade rest or attention, and I—when we went out to get in the car, well when we went I helped him in the car and held the door out of the car, that's all, and when we went home the same thing. But the—all the Russian dignitaries and French and English and American were there, including some of the American civilians that were very high—diplomatic. ... The next day they got a order from General Clay that he wanted me to come and see him at the ... American headquarters building. And I went over there, and he said, "I'm thinking,"—you know, what the hell does a—at that time he was a four star General. What's a four star General want to talk to a sergeant for? (Laughter) He said, "I'm thinking about forming a unit of good soldiers, good looking elite soldiers like you." He complimented me, and said, "Will you be part of it? Would you volunteer to be?" I said, "Yes, Sir. If that's what you want." So he formed the General Clay's Honor Guard Platoon. Called up a lieutenant—I've got a picture of him over there ... young, good, straight lieutenant by the name of Stuart, and he and I formed the ... honor guard platoon. What General Clay did is he gave colonel, or at that time his lieutenant, a letter authorizing him to pick any soldier in the American Army in Europe to belong to this platoon. So Lieutenant Stuart and I went to the zone and went to each unit and he just showed the colonel or whoever was in charge this letter and they'd form up their battalion or company or whatever they had and Lieutenant Stuart and I'd go along and say, "We'll take you and you and you and you." The prerequisites of belonging to the platoon—the criteria that Lieutenant Stuart and I drew up: that had to be over six feet tall, couldn't have a waist larger than thirty inches, had to have an I.Q. of a hundred, a hundred or above, and had to have a least two years to do on your enlistment, and no court martials and your present listing. That was the criteria. So we picked up sixty people and we took them to Berlin. And everyday for eight hours a day, I drilled them, myself personally.

DENTON: Mm hmm.

FRANKLIN: And we—on silent drill, I could give one command and they would drill for thirty minutes. The best thing you've ever seen, absolutely beautiful. Well, in addition to being a ceremonial unit, we had to go to Belgium when General—when Patton was killed and they took him and buried him first in Germany. Well later they buried him in Hamm, Luxembourg. We



had to go to Hamm to bury him. We had to go to Verdun, France for a particular ceremony, I don't remember what it was. We had to go to Mons, Belgium for some—we had to do this ceremonial shit. In addition to that, we had to perform duty at the Allied Control Authority Building. We had one sergeant from the platoon that sat at a desk—he had an American desk, the Russian desk, the French desk, and the English desk. And any German that came in that needed to see somebody for permission to open a restaurant or to build a house or whatever they needed to do, they had to go to the person that was responsible for the zone they lived in. So I worked with a Russian, his name was Valentin. He sat beside of me, that every time I had this unit—we rotated among the sergeants and there was only six of us sergeants at that time. So every sixth day, I would get this duty. And you go there at eight o'clock in the morning and you'd stay 'til four. You sat right beside of him. The ... American was commanded by an American, Lieutenant Stuart, and the French by a Frenchman, and the English by an Englishman, and the Russian by a Russian woman captain, good-looking woman, very good-looking woman. But the Russian guard detail lived in the American sector. So Valentin became a little familiar with the Americans and everything, but let's say he was a German and he'd come in and he needed permission to do so and so, whatever, you had to have permission.

DENTON: Mm hmm.

FRANKLIN: And if he was from the Americans—American, he'd talk to me and I would find out what he wanted and I would call the appropriate person in the building and ask them if they had time to see him, and they would say, "Bring him up." And I'd take him up to a particular officer and do that. Well, the Russian captain came one day and called Valentin up to the—but we were here and the steps went up to a thing and she's up there and he went up and they went over to the wall talking. So he come back and he said, "You know, I will be leaving." And we said, "Why?" He said, "Well, they are sending me back to Russia. They are sending me home." And we said, "Don't you want to go?" And he said, "No," said, "I don't want to go." [He] said, "But I want to say goodbye to you all." We all spoke some German, some French, some English before so we all became quite friendly with each other, and that was the reason they were sending him back to Russia.

ROMEISER: Mm hmm.

FRANKLIN: So he went up and went down to the end of the hall to the bathroom, took his pistol, put it in his mouth and killed himself.

ROMEISER: Hmm.

FRANKLIN: Right there. Bang. Well shortly after that they started the Berlin blockade ...

-----END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE TWO-----

ROMESIER: So that was when you had been assigned to Berlin. That was ... that was there?

FRANKLIN: When I got there ...

ROMESIER: The silver lining of the cloud of going to Berlin. Yeah.

FRANKLIN: I met her [His wife] in the winter of '46, yeah. So and by the way by June we were gonna get married. Well we had approval to get married when the blockade started, but because they had—we only had one officer in the company other than company commander. We only had one officer. So they took the company, they took my platoon of sixty men and they broke it down into two platoons. Well they made me platoon leader of one platoon and my job was to defend a road leading through the American sector to the airport, Tempelhof Airport, with one rifle platoon—fourteen miles. So they had a meeting and I'm just—and they asked us, all the platoon leaders who had specific jobs to do, "How long you think you can last?" Around us was 120 Russian tank battalions around Berlin in the vicinity. In Berlin we had one tank company of eighteen tanks. The Russians maybe had a 1,000. (Laughs) I don't know how many of them tanks they've got around it. So they asked us, "How long do you think you can hold off?" And I said, "How long do you think it will take the Russians to drive their tanks from the nearest point to my position?" They said, "Well, traveling at a military convoy speed of twenty eight miles an hour blah blah blah, it would probably take them two hours." I said, "It'll take me—I can hold out about two hours." (Laughter) They said, "Well, realistically, we think you'll get it on the head," that's about true. So my wife and I, we stayed there, and my wife and I married in August and within ... within a month after we married, General Clay gave me his airplane, his personal plane for me and my wife, and his car picked me up and picked my wife up, drove us to the airport and put on his personal plane, and flew us to Frankfurt. You can ask my wife. The first time I was a staff sergeant—still a staff sergeant, got a personal plane with two captains flying it. (Laughter) And my wife was very impressed, you know.

ROMEISER: Ben, you had been home only that one time you said, when you were on leave after the war ended.

FRANKLIN: Mm hmm.

ROMEISER: About thirty—thirty something ...

FRANKLIN: Thirty nine days. Mm hmm.

ROMESIER: And then you went back.

FRANKLIN: I went back.

ROMEISER: And first of all, those thirty nine days which you were home, what were they like? Were they strange? Was it—were you treated as this hero?

FRANKLIN: It was absolutely unbelievable. First, when I came home ...

UTE FRANKLIN (BEN'S WIFE): You still interviewing?

FRANKLIN: What honey?

UTE FRANKLIN: Are you still interviewing?

FRANKLIN: Yeah.

UTE FRANKLIN: Okay. Bye.

ROMEISER: Well, we're moving along.

DENTON: Yeah.

UTE FRANKLIN: Good! (Laughs)

FRANKLIN: First, I—in Germany, while I was in Germany going through the war and I had seen the misery of the civilian people from Africa all the way to Germany, and I suddenly realized that there's very little difference between a German or a Frenchman or an Italian or an Arab or an Englishman or an American. Language is a little different, but other than that we all want the same thing. We need to be warm, and we need to have our family, and we need to eat, and this is the struggle of mankind and I'm beginning to feel this, see? And I started watching how the people were. We had millions of people in Germany who were from Poland, Hungaria, Italy, Greece, France, England, all over the world—prisoners of war and everything. And we were turning soldiers, German soldiers, we would turn them lose by the trainloads, you know. “How many people live in this area?” And we'd load those prisoners up on the train and they would take—not me, but the army would take them home and people were moving ... and civilians are looking for—mothers are looking for their little children, and children are walking around starving looking for their parents, and their parents are killed in the Holocaust or if the—you've gotta remember, out of every three people who lived in Poland when the war started, one of them died. So you can imagine the Polack—they took the men and the Germans took all the Polacks and made them work, the men, and took all the women and made them maids and made them work, too, in concentration camps, but most young Polish women they made them maids to German families and everything. So now the war ends and these people are just—they're lost, they had nothing to do. Now I moved from this setting, this environment, to Knoxville, Tennessee and they're complaining they don't have ... they are only allowed so much sugar a month and they can't get tires for their cars. Well we didn't have a car anyway, but, you know, the general people. And, of course, when I came home I was a—it was published in the paper and I was a decorated hero and all that bull, and people that I played ball with when I was a kid come and they'd complain and tell me about, “Well, you don't know how tough we had it.” (Laughter) And it was just really—I had to bite my damn tongue all the time. Even my own family complained about not having enough butter or not having this and I'm comparing this to the environment I've just left, and you just can't come out and say, “You stupid son-of-a-bitch, you don't know what life is about.” You can't come out to people. The Americans wouldn't understand that.

So I was eager to get away ... from this phony bullshit and get back to the real world where pussy was pussy and a cigarette was a cigarette, you know. (Laughter) Where things had some value. So I was extremely disappointed in the American people. Now I am talking about the American civilians. I'm sure ... that many of them had it very difficult, I'm not saying that, but

my experience when I came home from the war was that they were ... they really didn't appreciate what the people of Europe were going through.

ROMEISER: Mm hmm.

FRANKLIN: We'll put it that way. And I'm talking about, you know, like Frau Zimmerman. She had it good as long as I was there because she was my first sergeant. She ran the village, she hired the girls, she told everyone—if they ever had a problem, they'd come to her, she'd come to me, or—when the mess sergeant brought the trailer load of food up every Friday, she was responsible for that. She took care of the food. She could slip them butter—the people of the village, butter or coffee or something, you know. She had control of the village, but she lost her husband. I later found out her husband had died in Russia. She lost a daughter, she lost a son, you know, from her family and she loved me. She adopted me as a son. And she said when I left—I'll never forget when I left, I'm sitting in the Jeep and she's crying. And she says, "Will you come back to see me?" And I said, "No. I have no reason to ever come and see you again." And she said, "But, you're my son," and I said, "But I'm never coming back." And I've never gone back. No.

DENTON: Did you write her or did you keep in contact?

FRANKLIN: No. No.

DENTON: That was the last time that you ever saw her.

FRANKLIN: No. No. I had a saying ... "Never go back to where you were before because it is not the same." I stayed in Germany for six or eight years and I never went back to England. Where I lived all that time in England, you know, I ... and when I went to France—when I went to France it was a different problem there because I would go to France with General Clay's wife. We would get on the airplane and we would go to Paris, a sedan from the American embassy would pick her up and I was free for however long she would stay, and I had a little separate life there which was not to be publicized. And she would come back and I would come back and meet the plane and come back to Germany. It was a different life, you know. Well ...

ROMEISER: Ben, let me ask you about re-entry. You came—after you were married ... when did you come back to the states?

FRANKLIN: November of '48.

ROMEISER: That's—okay, that's when you went to Fort Jackson? Is that right?

FRANKLIN: No. We came home. We stayed here in Knoxville about—stayed with my mother right there.

ROMEISER: Really?

FRANKLIN: About ... we stayed maybe a week.

ROMEISER: How did the people here or your family feel about you marrying a German or bringing a German war bride home?

FRANKLIN: Well ...

ROMESIER: It was fairly common, but I just wondered what kind of ...

FRANKLIN: Well, the problem—well, it wasn't a problem. You see, my whole life I was the sole support for my mother and two sisters who were little. I think when the war started, Mammie was probably five and the other one was eight or nine—Marie. Well, when the war ended, you know, every month I sent them an allotment.

ROMESIER: Yeah.

FRANKLIN: And they lived off that allotment. And when the war ended they are still my dependents.

ROMESIER: Oh yeah.

FRANKLIN: And there's still an allotment that went to my mother and ... to the two girls. Well I decided well, they may want to come to Europe. And me being a staff sergeant I'm entitled to bring my dependents to Europe.

ROMESIER: Hmm.

FRANKLIN: So I wrote them and ask if they wanted to come and, of course, they jumped at the opportunity to come. Well, they—it was great. So I got permission ... to take over any house I wanted in Berlin in the American sector that belonged to a Nazi. Well the first one was a doctor, a veterinary doctor who had a villa and everything, but he had to have his dogs and things in his house. I didn't like that and it said I'm authorized to kick these people out. But I looked at four or five ones and finally I took a villa—a fifteen room villa with a tennis court, the whole works, that belonged to the chief of police of Berlin and the woman's name was Frau Pole and she had a daughter named Gisele—we still are friends by the way. And I went to them and hadn't gone through this deal of kicking someone out in ... a year before in Ering. I was familiar with the crisis this brought upon the person. So when I presented the documents and told Frau Pole they had to get out and they could only take what they had on their shoulders, of course she started crying, her daughter started crying, and her daughter spoke some English. She was a year or two younger than I. I said, "Oh, goddamn here we go through this same goddamned shit again." (Laughter) You know, and there's one thing I can't stand is a damn woman crying, you know. Although I made a million cry myself, I just can't stand up to her ... and I said, "Okay. Okay," remembering Frau Zimmerman, I said, "How would you like to stay and be my cook and take care of the house?" [They said], "Oh, we'll do anything." So I let Frau Pole and her daughter stay in the house. Fifteen rooms. What the hell do I need with fifteen rooms?

So my mother and two sisters came over and I got them all together: Frau Pole, her daughter Gisele, my mother, and two sisters and I said, “Here’s the law. There’s got to be rules.” I said, “The top floor—five rooms—the top floor belongs to you ladies. The second floor is the living, the sociable area. We can all come there and socialize and have dinners and meals and everything, but the bottom floor belongs to me. Nobody is to be on the bottom floor. The stairs coming down to the door, from therein to the five rooms here is sergeant Franklin’s ....”

ROMEISER: ... territory...

FRANKLIN: “... Stay out!” (Laughter) And it was utilized to its fullest, you can believe that. And, of course, I had all my family there ... they saw how the Germans had to live. Everyday the bus would come to the house, a girl would come to the door, pick up my two sisters, put them on the bus, take them to school, bring them home, bring them to the door. My mother would pick up the phone, they would deliver coal for the furnace ... commissary and all. It’s just a life of luxury for them. Of course, I’m a rifle soldier. I’m out drilling and all this other stuff, but they’re living the life of luxury, but they know what’s going on with the German people around them. So when Ute and I came home ...

ROMEISER: Was there a problem?

FRANKLIN: Yeah, it was no problem, yeah. Only my father ... he dropped by one day and he said ... how did he say it? He said, “You know, I thought I had raised a smart boy, but you have proven me wrong.” And I said, “Well how’s that?” Without some anger, you know, I said, “And how’s that?” And he said, “Well you’re the only man I know that will spend three years fighting the Germans and then marry one. You’re gonna have to fight for the rest of your goddamned life.” (Laughter) I said, “Well daddy maybe I won’t have to fight her.” (Laughter) Then we stayed thirteen days and I went to Fort Jackson, then back into your army routine, you know.

ROMEISER: When did you muster out and when were you finally free of your army commitments? Early ‘50s?

FRANKLIN: When I was finally finished?

ROMEISER: Yeah.

FRANKLIN: I finished June 30, 1963.

ROMEISER: ‘63.

FRANKLIN: Mm hmm.

ROMEISER: Okay. So you put in twenty ... plus years. Yeah.

FRANKLIN: Mm hmm. I went in—I wasn’t sworn in at the time, but I went in December 8, ‘41 and I came out June 30, ‘63.

ROMEISER: Mm hmm.

FRANKLIN: So that's almost twenty-two years ... about twenty two years.

DENTON: From the '50s to the '60s, what was your MOS [Military Occupational Specialty]? Were you in a battalion or were—did you ...

FRANKLIN: Hmm?

DENTON: What was your job? Were you in battalion? Were you a drill sergeant? What did you do during that time period after the war 'til the '60's when you were discharged?

FRANKLIN: Of what period? What time?

ROMEISER: Well '50's, through the 1950's.

DENTON: Yeah.

FRANKLIN: Through the '50's? Yeah, first I was a drill sergeant at ... Fort Jackson. Then I was sent here to Knoxville in ... December of '49—although my report in date was on January '50, and as an advisor to the Reserve Officers Training or to the Reserve Units here in Knoxville, which is only right down the road from here. Do you know where Standard Knitting Mill? It was one of their buildings. In the back is where our headquarters was.

DENTON: Oh, okay.

FRANKLIN: And I had thirty seven units there and I stayed until the Korean War started. And looking at these reserve units—again, smart—looking at these reserve units, and ... as they would call—like they'd call the 841<sup>st</sup> Tank Battalion. They called it to active duty. Well the advisor for that unit, a regular army soldier went with it. And I said, "Uh oh. Uh oh. You don't want to be in no goddamned mock mixed unit. Get back to the regular army." So I wrote a letter to Nashville, our headquarters, and it said, "I request immediate reassignment to a regular army infantry unit." And they sent me to the Fifth Division—the Fifth Division over at Fort Riley. That's how I got away from there.

ROMEISER: Otherwise you might have ended up in Korea you think?

FRANKLIN: Yeah. Well I expected to go to Korea.

ROMEISER: Yeah.

FRANKLIN: I volunteered to go to Korea.

ROMEISER: Did you?

FRANKLIN: But I wanted it to be with a regular army unit.

ROMEISER: Right. Yeah.

FRANKLIN: I didn't want it to be with some reserve unit that I wasn't too familiar with. I know how—maybe some were different, but I had thirty-seven units and there wasn't one that was worth a damn. (Laughter)

ROMEISER: How was it that you avoided going to Korea? Why do you think you ended up not being sent over there?

FRANKLIN: Because they came down with a request for an American—by the way I was promoted while I was here. Before I left Fort Jackson, they had what they called competitive examinations for a promotion to the next higher rank. So I took my examination and come out very high, and they promoted me while I was on my way to—the army promoted me. Now I'm a tech sergeant. I went to Fort Jackson and became a first sergeant. And then they wanted—the army wanted me as a master sergeant, first sergeant to be assigned to a unit in France who had some French military background.

ROMEISER: Now there you go.

FRANKLIN: Well, my French ...

ROMEISER: Yeah.

FRANKLIN: ... qualified me ...

ROMEISER: ... stuck you in good standing, yeah.

FRANKLIN: Plus, I had been in Africa.

ROMEISER: Oh, that was when you and Ute were over there in France around ...

FRANKLIN: Yeah. We lived there from...

ROMEISER: ... the Dordogne area.

FRANKLIN: Dordogne.

ROMEISER: Ah ha! So during the Korean War you were in France?

FRANKLIN: Huh?

ROMEISER: During the Korean War—some of the Korean War, you were stationed in France.

FRANKLIN: I was in France. Mm hmm.



ROMEISER: Not bad.

FRANKLIN: Then, we stayed there, and again—I try—want to get back to the Big Red One. So it has such a—everybody, you’ve got to understand, everybody in a key position between 1945 and 1955 was a former Big Red One man. The Chief of Staff, the plans in training, the G-1, my Company Commander, Battalion Commander Chuck Horner, Colonel Horner, “Bat Shit” Horner we called him, he was a Lieutenant General in the Pentagon.

ROMEISER: Oh.

FRANKLIN: I’d sit down, write a letter, “Dear Colonel Horner, I would like to get back to the division. Can you help help? Signed, Ben Franklin, First Sergeant Infantry.” The next thing I know is that they’d say, “Ben, what the hell. Where the hell did you get these orders?” And I’m on my way back to the Big Red One, you know, and that’s the way to do politics.

ROMEISER: Yeah there’s that ... comradery and cohesion there and ...

FRANKLIN: That’s why I said sometimes I’m angry at myself because I’m so critical about officers, but they are—we have a pattern in the American Army that does not let an American officer develop fully into the leader he could be. They believe that he should be well rounded. Well you go out to a construction site, and you show me a carpenter that can do the plumbing and the electrical work. Not if he’s a good carpenter. He’s a good carpenter. And you go to the University of Tennessee, and you show me somebody that is a good French major that is responsible for teaching French and he ain’t worth a shit over in the engineering department, you know. (Laughter) So why would you think that an army officer should be good as a leader of infantry, as S-1 personnel, or S-2 intelligence, or S-3 training, or S-4, or plans in training, or—why would they assume that? And therefore, you get an officer—and I know I kept track of them—I was a first sergeant for eleven years. Every seven months I got a new Company Commander, between seven and nine months. He had just learned ... how to be a good Company Commander and they transferred him to G-4 or the motor pool or some shit that is not gonna help him a bit. The next thing you know, he’s a Major Assistant Battalion Commander and then he’s a—he commands a battalion for six months, and then the next thing you know, he’s transferred to division level and they never become proficient in what they do.

ROMEISER: Yeah.

FRANKLIN: It was different in World War II.

ROMEISER: Mm hmm.

FRANKLIN: My Company Commander, Emil V.B. Edmond is his name, graduated from West Point in 1938 way down in his class, but he commanded a rifle, a machine gun company through eight, no seven campaigns. Africa, Sicily, D-Day, and Normandy, everything. And finally you know what they did? They made him Assistant Battalion Commander, Second Battalion just before the war ended.

ROMEISER: Hmm.

FRANKLIN: Then he—within a month after the war ended, they made him Regimental Commander. Now he's Regimental Commander, but he was a Company Commander through three years of fighting, you know. He was good. He really knew what he was doing. They sent him over to Captain Richmond in I Company ... I believe in Vietnam. I have all these friends that I've stayed in contact with. Of course, they're dying off now ... and everything, but what they would do with an officer in Vietnam was they'd send him to Vietnam—they call it ticket punching. They got—had to get six months on their record that they had commanded troops in Vietnam, and automatically that got them a Silver Star. Every officer that went to Vietnam got the Silver Star, automatically, if he commanded troops, every one, automatically. That's just part of it. That's to go on their record and they'd walk up and down the halls of the Pentagon and I know—oh, Lieutenant Stuart, Colonel Stuart, right down in Savannah, Georgia I could picture him right down there—he's just like a brother. In fact, he and his son—his son went to Vietnam, got both legs blown off here. They did the same thing to him. But his father was in the Pentagon and I said, "Colonel Stuart, how the hell did you stay out of Vietnam?" He said, "Ben, I hid in every corner in the Pentagon." (Laughter) So they'd walk up and down the hallway and they'd see them and start to drag you in and send you to Vietnam. He said, "I had sense enough to stay hid, and I didn't get up and down the hallway." But that's why we are doing so poorly now because even I—if I'd been in command to go into Iraq—and I've talked to Colonel Stuart about this, he said, "I would gladly go. If they'll give me a division I would gladly go into Iraq," but said, "I would do it my way." And that's the difference. We don't have anybody now that would do things their way.

ROMEISER: Right.

FRANKLIN: If—I've got the book. It's called *Panzer Leader: The Life of Guderian, the Father of Tank Warfare*. Hitler gave him a crazy order and he said, "Fuck you, I resign. I retire." So he resigned rather to execute that order. Well when we went into Iraq with 350,000 troops, or a 150,000, and they said we need 500,000 to really do the job right—that's what the Army Chief of Staff said. Well, the general that went in there, not Schwarzkopf, but the latest one. What's his name? Uh ... Franks.

ROMEISER: Tommy Franks, yes.

FRANKLIN: Franks. Franks said, "Oh, yeah. I can do it." So he went in there and what happened? We took ammunition dumps and we didn't have enough sense to secure them. That ammunition, the sergeants got it, they hid it. Now they're setting off bombs to blow our trucks. We're suffering. This is because one officer didn't have enough guts to say, "No. If you want me to do that I want so many people to help me do it. I don't—a 150,000 [troops] is not enough if I'm gonna do it right. I've got to secure the border on Iran, I've got to secure the border on ..." you know, "Syria, I've got to secure the border on Kuwait, and you're gonna give me a 150,000 troops to conquer these people, occupying and securing—I can't do it. I need more people," you know, "or I resign." Not one American officer has ever resigned since World War II.

DENTON: Yeah.

FRANKLIN: If that don't tell you something. (Laughter)

ROMEISER: It makes a statement, a powerful statement.

FRANKLIN: Yeah. Mm hmm.

ROMEISER: Now are we ...

DENTON: We're still rolling.

ROMEISER: Okay. Well, you want to cut it?

DENTON: Yeah. Sure.

ROMEISER: Unless you have anything else.

DENTON: I think that's it.

ROMEISER: Okay.

DENTON: ... this concludes an interview with Ben Franklin on March 10, 2005 with John Romeiser ...

ROMEISER: ... John Romeiser ... (Laughter)

DENTON: ... and Braum Denton. Sorry about that. (Laughs)

ROMEISER: Yeah.

DENTON: Okay, thank you a lot for your time.

FRANKLIN: My pleasure.

-----END OF INTERVIEW-----

Reviewed by Stephanie Crump 11/07/05

Reviewed by Cinnamon Brown 12/12/05

Reviewed by Kurt Piehler 1/8/2006