Interview with Harold Steele

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Interview # 1: September 8, 2008

Interviewer: Mark DePue

DePue: Today is Monday, September 8, 2008. I'm here with Harold Steele. I have just talked to his wife Margery before, this morning, but it's my delight to have a chance to talk to you today, Harold. Thank you very much.

Steele: Mark, I'm just honored you're here. Margery and I are very pleased, not only to play a role in what we think is very historic, and the fact that you have demonstrated not only your knowledge on the history, but also your demeanor, and knowing how to ask and when to ask, it's a pleasure.

DePue: Well, thank you very much Harold; it didn't even take that much money for you to get to say that. The reason I'm here, quite frankly, is because I know that Don Shandrow, who's another one of our excellent interviewers, has talked with you already about your experiences as a farmer and in the Farm Bureau and things like that. He deliberately stayed away from a detailed discussion about your military experiences, but insisted that I have a chance to talk to you about it. So that's why I'm really excited about being able to come up here and talk to both you and Margery. Let's start off at the beginning. When and where were you born?

Steele: I was born July 8, 1922, at Sublette, Illinois, which is in Lee County, twenty miles from where we're sitting on the family farm. The reason it was in Lee County, because my mother had been advised from a very close friend of hers that Dr. Angaer in Sublette had a new system of childbirth that's nearly painless, and she thought having given birth to three children already, it's time she got a painless opportunity. So that's where I was born, the little village of Sublette. The doctor had taken two houses and put a walkway between, enclosed walkway, and that was the hospital. And it went on for many years.

DePue: Your family wasn't living in Sublette at the time?

Steele: No. Right here at the farm.

DePue: Okay. I want to hear your explanation for how your ancestors ended up here in Illinois.

Steele: We'll start with my paternal ancestors. Well, first of all I'd say a certain George Steele passed away at an advanced age in 1634 in the East, and I believe it was in Connecticut. Then our family history is elapsed until 1848 when my great-grandfather, his widowed mother and his siblings came to Dover from Ohio. I know not what happened to his father other than he was killed in an accident in the woods. Why his mother selected Dover I do not know. But the family came to Dover and he was about twenty-one years of age, worked on the farm a year and found out that his health did not permit that sort of labor, and became employed in a general store. And in a few years he owned a general store. If I might say, this is a story I use saying that I'm a born loser. [both chuckle] My great-grandfather, after he was employed at this general store, met another young storekeeper about his age and they had much in common. as they worked together for a short period of time, they decided, look, we really have the same goals in life. We believe in the general stores. If we form a partnership, this could minimize our individual weaknesses, multiply our strengths, and we should really have a very successful venture. The question then was, where should we have the store? My great-grandfather says, Right here in Dover. There's six hundred people, all of the farmers in the area. And of course at that time, farms were small and there were many farmers. And also the transient trade. The transient trade would be from southern Illinois, eastern Missouri, and southeastern Iowa going up this little diagonal trail to this little village in the swamps next to Lake Michigan called Chicago. And my grandfather thought also, The railroad is going to come. Little did he realize the politicians at Princeton, the county seat, would switch the railroad and go through Princeton. [both chuckle] Right here's the place! The other fellow says, Well, no, you could be right, but I believe Chicago might be the way to go. So they didn't form the partnership; my grandfather did build his store in Dover. And Marshall Field went up to Chicago to build his store. So I'm a born loser! [laughter] Now Mark, I told that story to the Chicago Farmers, and at that time in history they held their meetings in the third floor of Marshall Field's for lunch and meetings. So I told this story, but I said, "There's an aftermath to that story. At this very moment, my niece is working in the treasurer's office here at Marshall Field. We're going to get our half yet."[laughter] After the meeting, a little lady came up and said, "Mister, what's your niece's name? I work in the treasurer's office, too!"

So we've had fun. But it's a story, it's real, perhaps fabricated a bit through the years. But we all make mistakes regardless of our profession. I've made many mistakes myself. As long as we learn from a mistake, that's okay.

DePue: This is your great-grandfather you've been talking about, right?

Steele: Yes.

DePue: Maybe it wasn't necessarily something he viewed as a mistake. It's just a decision he made and life is what it is.

Steele: Absolutely. He retired on Park Avenue in Princeton, very wealthy from the standards here in Dover, and he was glad he did what he did. And I'm sure Marshall Field was tickled that he didn't stay in Dover.

DePue: What was your great-grandfather's name, then?

Steele: Andrew Lathrop Steele.

DePue: Okay. Can you trace the family from him to when you were born, then?

Steele: Yes. My great-grandfather had one daughter and five sons. My grandfather was the elder of those sons, and he was the one, the only one in that family, that chose to farm. So my great-grandfather bought the first eighty acres right where we're sitting; this is the corner of that eighty acres, purchased in 1873, and this is where my grandfather started farming. Then my father, the oldest son of that marriage, was the only one in that family to farm, of the boys. One of his sisters married a farmer. And then in my generation, I'm the only one that stayed on the farm, and in my generation, now meaning our son, we have one son and he's farming. So it is the fourth generation involved in the land.

DePue: Now you had told me when we met earlier a story. I don't know if it was your father or your grandfather who was purchasing land in other parts of the country as well.

Steele: Yes. My father. My father was born in 1882, and when he was twenty-one years of age, 1903, I just doubt if he'd ever been out of the county. I doubt that he'd been across the Mississippi River, which was sixty miles. But he went to Texas. I'm sure he got on the train at Princeton and went to Texas and bought a farm. I've often wondered as life proceeded on, why didn't I sit down with my dad and say, Dad, why did you choose Texas? What did you see as an opportunity there? So I can't answer; I don't know. But it's the panhandle of Texas, flat and black, and I suspect he thought, There has got to be a future here. Now remember, he's twenty-one. Dad finished grade school, one semester in high school, and he figured, That's good enough. I'm going back to the farm, that's what I want to do. I don't want education to interfere with my progress. [laughter] Dad, he had great management skills. He had a great philosophy on participating in the American enterprise system. And in his words, he said, "When I buy a piece of land, I had 50% cash in my pocket and I knew where the other 50% was going to come from." So even though he borrowed that other 50%, he knew he could pay it off on a schedule that was very comfortable. To me, that's a great story of our country: our dynamic system that works so well when we don't interfere with the system.

DePue: Did your father then move to Texas, or did he stay up here?

Steele: He stayed right here on the farm and farmed with his father for a number of years. Then when he was married he lived in a little house about sixty rods down the road and walked back and forth for probably a dozen years. You know, come up and do chores in the morning, walk home for breakfast, walk home at noon, walk home at

night. He finally got a little tired of that I guess, so his dad retired, moved to town, and he came up here to the big house.

DePue: For those of us who are a little bit ignorant, how long would a rod be? How far is sixty rods?

Steele: Okay, there's sixteen and a half feet in a rod, and so 160 rods is a half a mile.

DePue: Okay, so he was darn close.

Steele: Yeah, he was a quarter of a mile away.

DePue: Okay. Well, talk about what your father had and what he was doing then when you came along?

Steele: Well, Dad was farming 220 acres. That farm had grown from the original eighty to the 220 through my grandfather and grandmother. Dad had followed his father's footsteps in the methodology of farming: namely livestock and grain, mixed livestock and grain. At that time, when I was born, farming was a way of life. You grew the food that you needed. You had a vegetable garden. You had an orchard of fruit trees. You had, not a potato patch, but pretty near a potato field. The only thing that mother would buy at the store would be salt and pepper and flour and a few ingredients like this, and barter for them. Barter the cream, barter the eggs that you didn't need. Or barter the chickens. And that was a way of life, and that way of life was sustained until about World War II. That seemed to be the breaking point in this part of the United States, when we took out the fences and started specializing. We specialized in this particular area in corn. When I started farming after World War II, Margie and I came home to the farm, farmed with my brother starting in 1948 for two years, then went on my own. We still had rotations then, in 1948. A rotation of corn to corn, seeded it to oats, and alfalfa and legumes, and then hay or pasture the next year. That's the way my dad did it. My dad produced about fifty bushels of corn to the acre; a good year it was sixty. Now today, my son does over 200. So that evolution came by through modernization of many types, but our way of life also changed.

DePue: So much of this that you're talking about, you're growing up in the height of the Depression. From what I understand, the Depression hit farming long before it hit the rest of the country, though, as well. Was your diversified farm life, pretty self-sustaining, was that a factor of just being able to survive in the first place?

Steele: Yes it was. We didn't go hungry. Unlike Margery growing up in a city where she'd see people jumping out of skyscrapers, we didn't see that. Because rural America had the food on the table. We were poor but we didn't know it. We had patches on our overalls maybe three deep, but we were all in the same economic position. Many, many farmers lost their farm; they went bankrupt through no fault of their own. They just happened to be in a condition of timing. My father didn't go broke, didn't lose the land, but dad was very, very skillful in management and not spending a penny unless he had to. He was frugal. We were happy. Our

entertainment was families getting together with the neighbors; our entertainment was to entertain one another. You stayed home at night; you read stories. But not like Abraham Lincoln in front of the fireplace necessarily, but you learned to live with what you had. You didn't buy new things except on Christmas. And I would say, Mark, on Christmas was the only orange I had in a full year, and that orange was right down in the toe of my stocking that hung over the fireplace. That wasn't just Harold Steele; that was all of us. You couldn't go to the grocery store in July and buy an orange because it wasn't there, nor did you have the money. So today we have all these wonderful things that we didn't have then but we didn't know any different because it wasn't that way.

DePue: I wonder if you can tell us a little bit about the nature of the soil and the growing conditions we have right here in this part of Illinois.

Steele: This part of Illinois is blessed with wondrous climatic conditions and very fertile soil. At this very location where we're sitting, we're on the east bank of the original Mississippi River before the Wisconsin glacier came through and pushed that River sixty miles to the West. So that 280 or -90 feet above the river was brought in by the glacier. When the glacier came, it brought the kind of subsoil and substrata soil, and then later on as the plant growth came, this black top soil and the clay subsoil. It's just the very best that God created and we're so fortunate to be here. Some of my son Greg's buddies from Iowa say, Greg Steele, you lucky guy, how did you end up there? How come you ended up where everything is so great? Greg says, I don't know except I guess that's where the wheel fell off the wagon. [both chuckle] So that's my story too.

DePue: Why was I thinking, though, that it's a little bit sandier here than some other parts of Illinois.

Steele: You have to go further north for the sand. We don't have any sand here. But in northwest of Bureau County, there's sand. Across the border in Lee County, there's sand. But not here. We have quite a diversification of soil though in Bureau County. Like down in Tiskilwa, the southern part, we have quite a little variation in terrain and soil types. Here it's quite flat, not more than maybe 3% slope.

DePue: Okay, so you're sitting on some of the best land in the United States during the Depression and you're getting a little bit more moisture than the Western Plain states in the Dust Bowl era, I would assume.

Steele: Yes, but there's another factor, Mark, and that's the timing of rainfall. Southern Illinois will get about four inches per year more water than we do. We average about forty to forty-four. They'll get four inches more. But fortunately, ours is more timely through July and August. Theirs will be more in the spring and more through the winter. We're just very fortunate. That's where the wheel came off the wagon or we wouldn't be here.

DePue: How about electricity? Did you have electricity growing up on the farm?

Steele: Yes I did. I did because my dad saw a picture in a magazine when he was a teenager.

DePue: This would have been about the early ‘20s.

Steele: He was born in 1882, so this was say 1895, ’-6, -7, -8. He saw this picture of this house, and he took it. And he said to his folks, “If I ever build a home, this is going to be it“ Unbeknownst to him, they took this picture down to Princeton, five miles away, showed it to an architect, drew up the plans, went to a contractor, and when Dad was twenty-one he spent all winter hauling bricks for the foundation and the chimneys for that very home that he saw a picture of. And that’s the reality. That’s the way this house came into being. And he played a major role in it.

DePue: Where did the electricity come in that?

Steele: When he built this house, they wired it. The fixtures were made for gas lights, but they used wire for them. And the old house, part of the old house, original house, that sat here, was moved back about twenty rods, —excuse me, about a hundred feet –and there was a gas engine and electric plant. And so every evening they’d start the gas engine to generate electricity for the house. The high line then came through about fifteen years later.

DePue: I was going to say, when they first did that, this was quite a unique experience, having electricity in a farm like this, I would think.

Steele: Very much so. We have a newspaper clipping. When my grandparents had an open house for this new house, I think the subheadline was, “And they have electricity out there on the farm!” [laughter] Yes.

DePue: How about horses versus tractors? When did tractors arrive on the farm?

Steele: Well, Dad’s first tractor was a Ford, so that would have been probably about the time of my birth in 1922, that era. Not much before. Of course up until that time it was 100% horses. But Dad being the kind of person that he was, he would get an idea or see a picture or hear a story, he’d say, That’s the way to go. So he was one of the earlier ones to have a tractor, a Fordson tractor. And that would pull two fourteen-inch plows, and I would tell you that I’ve never driven that tractor. I was too young. But I remember when it went down the road to the field, that transmission had a really great whine to it, and I thought if you’re sitting on that seat all day long and hear that whine, it must be deafening. Well, my older brother, four years older than I, he was the one that drove it. Particularly when Dad was harvesting oats, that tractor would be pulling the binder and my brother, hearing this whining and that engine, couldn’t really hear when Dad said, Stop! Because something went haywire on the binder. He’d holler for my brother to push the clutch in and stop. Couldn’t hear. So Dad took a piece of binder twine and tied it to his straw hat, and when something went wrong and he wanted him to stop, he’d give that binder twine a pull and jerk his hat off, and he’d put in the clutch. [laughter] My brother didn’t think that was so funny.

DePue: But it worked, I suspect.

Steele: It worked. Yes it did.

DePue: Well tell me about the kind of stories you had growing up on the farm.

Steele: As I say, farming was a way of life. So we had a very diversified operation. We had chickens: chickens to eat and chickens to lay eggs. We had an orchard with fruits. We had a grapevine. We had a big garden with all kinds of vegetables, and a potato patch except it was a field. And we harvested all these things and mother canned. But I want to say it wasn't just my mother. This is another story, another example, of how life used to be. My maternal grandparents lived in Tiskwila where my mother was born, and he was accidentally killed on the railroad.

DePue: What was his name?

Steele: His name was John Baker. So my mother's mother, my maternal grandmother, came and lived with us. So I really had two mothers –not I ,but all of us, all of our family –because this occurred shortly after my parents were married. So my grandmother came and lived with the folks, and lived here until the day she passed away here at the farm in her 95th year,

DePue: In this very house.

Steele: In this very house.

DePue: How many Steeles were in the house then?

Steele: Eight. My parents, my grandmother, and five children. And if I might diversify a bit, my grandmother was born in Canada in 1845. When she was a young lady, her family moved to Boscobel, Wisconsin. At age thirteen—and I'll repeat that—at age thirteen, she started teaching grade school, an eight class, one room grade school at age thirteen. Graduate from eighth grade, she was eligible. Married when she was sixteen and she was no longer eligible, because the rule then is no female that's married is eligible to teach. And when she was, let's see, in 1873 she would have been then twenty-eight years old, she and her husband—not my grandfather but her husband—and their two daughters went from Boscobel in a covered wagon, all their furnishings, driving their cattle, to Mason City, Iowa. And during that trip, they smelled smoke. Many, many weeks later, they found out Chicago had burned, and the east wind which saved many lives and carried the smoke to the west. We have upstairs a piece of furniture –it's a chest of drawers, that was in that covered wagon. They had it up in the second floor of the farm house in Mason City, Iowa area. The house caught fire. She ran upstairs to get the possessions. That particular chest of drawers, she threw those drawers out the window and carried the carcass down. I hope that chest of drawers stays in this family with that history attached to it. That's early America and that's the way it was.

DePue: Doing some quick math here, though, I feel like I'm missing a generation. She was born in 1845?

Steele: That's right.

DePue: And your father was born when?

Steele: This is my mother's mother. My mother was born in 1884 and she had two older sisters.

DePue: Okay, so she came along quite late then.

Steele: Yes. My grandmother, my maternal grandmother, did the impossible, the wrong thing to do. She divorced her first husband because he was an alcoholic, and in that time in history you did not divorce. But she did. She then met her second husband, John Baker, in Tiskwila and that's my mother's father.

DePue: Okay, so that explains why it feels like we're missing a generation. She was quite elderly, then, when you were growing up in this house.

Steele: Yes. And she was quite blind. I remember she had said, "Harold, you take my hand. I have some peach seeds here. I want to plant them around the edge of the garden, but you'll have to guide me." And she and I went out and she had collected these peach seeds from some white peaches that she really thought were the finest peaches that God ever created. We planted those peach seeds around the garden and enjoyed those trees for many years in the future. She lived to be ninety-five. What a rugged life she had, but she had lots of grit.

DePue: And she had lots of company those last few years, it sounds like.

Steele: Yes.

DePue: Do you remember towards the latter part of the Depression, then, did you start paying attention to what was going on in the world?

Steele: I had the good fortune in high school to have a kind of history teacher that explained to us that it was very important for us to understand, not only American history, but world history. This would offer us a chance to see, through the written word and historical documents, of the differences in forms of government. And I hadn't thought of that before. I just hadn't thought of it because this is home and my borders were very limited. We had a little radio to listen to, a battery radio. My grandmother would tell me about Iowa. And that's about as far as I really thought about. Way out there in Iowa across the Mississippi River. The rest of the world just didn't exist in my mind, in my hemisphere. Only through this teacher. And one of the low points in that history, in world history, was a country called the Soviet Union. Russia. Russia was ruled under a communist form of government, The leaders literally murdered millions of their own countrymen for one purpose, and that was to change the form of government. And I thought, How can that be? Why

would that be? The people have nothing to say, but yet, here in America, we all have something to say. If we didn't like the way things were, maybe it's because we didn't say something. And it all sort of gelled. But Mark, that made a great impression on me some years later when I was in the Army, in Europe.

DePue: And we are certainly going to get to that point. But at this stage in your life, junior high and high school, I assume this happened in high school, did you really have an understanding of what communism was supposed to be?

Steele: Well, we had the written word but I personally couldn't imagine why leaders could act that way. But they did.

DePue: We're going to take a quick break here because there's somebody tapping at the door, it looks like.

(break in audio)

Steele: Am I talking too long?

DePue: No, no, this is fine, Harold. We were talking about your impressions of what was going on in Europe. I'm especially curious whether you knew about what was going on in Germany and if you had a sense that there were some war clouds building.

Steele: Oh yes, indeed. We would hear Hitler on the radio, and we'd and shake our head and laugh and say, "That is a crazy, man." We just couldn't understand how anyone could shout and carry on in such a manner, "a leader." We also got the word that things weren't going too well in Japan, in the far east, and there were war clouds over there. The Japanese had invaded China and the reason that they'd done this is they just plain ran out of room on their island, and they just invaded China so they could have their people go over in China. And we knew that we had a great friend in China. And we just thought that that was pretty bad that Japan was just going in and murdering the Chinese.

DePue: Was there any sense in your household, any discussion in the house or at school that the United States might be pulled into a war somewhere down the road?

Steele: No, no, nothing was said. But let me also mention the Italians. Here, the Italians, they've got this man that's organizing armies, got a lot of equipment, airplanes and tanks, and went down and fought Haile Selassie, [Emperor of Ethiopia] these innocent people with no arms but sticks and stones. How could they do that? What is going on in this world? But you felt—even though you didn't read it, even though you didn't hear it publicly—you knew that one day, unless a miracle happened, we were going to be in that war.

DePue: Well, September of '39 is when the Germans first invaded Poland. But even before that time you had a sense of foreboding to a certain extent?

Steele: Yup. And of course the Italians. Well, the Japanese started it when they invaded China, but that was a long, long, long way away from here. But then closer at home, of course, when the Italians go down into Ethiopia, we thought, What in the world are they doing that for? And then when the Germans committed the Anschluss there in '39 in Austria and then went into Poland, Aha! And then started buzz bombing our good friends the Britons, then things were getting a little more realistic.

DePue: Well, the buzz bombs would have happened in late 1940, and wasn't that the year you graduated from high school?

Steele: Yes it was.

DePue: What were your thoughts when you finished high school? What did you see as your future?

Steele: I was going to be a farmer. By heavens, that was going to be my real occupation. I never considered anything else, and when I graduated from high school I was going to come right to the farm. But about a week or two before the fall semester started down in Champagne-Urbana, my mother said, Harold, get ready, pack your bags because you're going down to the University of Illinois. I said, Me? Yes, son, you are going to the University of Illinois. And thanks to my mother, that's what happened.

DePue: Thanks to your mother. So you think in retrospect that was the right thing to happen?

Steele: Oh. Bless her heart, yes. She believed in education. My dad was very happy on the farm. As I mentioned, he had one semester in high school and that was good enough, and I sort of felt I'd follow Dad's tracks. But my mother changed both of our minds.

DePue: If you had followed in your father's tracks, you would have been helping your father around his farm? Or would you have your own land to work?

Steele: I'd help Dad. Yup, he needed help. You know, 220 acres, that was really quite an operation because we had mixed livestock, we had to specialize in hogs, and he needed help. And milk cows. He said, Harold, have some cows. That gives you a weekly paycheck. So I'm sure I'd have done just like my dad.

DePue: The weekly paycheck was from the milk, then?

Steele: Yeah, yeah.

DePue: What did you major in in college?

Steele: Animal science.

DePue: No question in your mind that that's what you wanted to do?

Steele: Absolutely.

DePue: And did you enjoy your college experience?

Steele: Yes I did for one reason, that's the fraternity I was in. It's called Farmhouse. We were all from the farm, and there was a common bond. All great, thousands and thousands of students, but here was this—the Ag School that separated us and no fences, you understand. The separation was from profession and background and then the fraternity, and there was a common bond. We all came from the same background, we had the same principles of life. I found this to be the sort of melting pot from all of this outside sorts, of lawyers and engineers and commerce people to we Aggies. And then in the classroom you'd be, not only with your own fraternity brothers, but the Ag School, both men and women. I felt that this school really helped me focus on a broader, a much broader life, a much broader opportunity of knowing our country through the daily experiences of professors and classmates.

And a word about professors. As a youngster, I was taught by my mother and father: you believe the preacher, you believe the teacher, you believe the lawyer, the judge. These voices were supreme. You didn't challenge because they spoke with authority and righteousness. And I saw that too on campus in that era of time. I saw it and I listened to it; and when the teachers told you something, they proved it through example. And I was enriched by this. But I didn't grow, really grow in the sense of being responsible for my actions, until the next phase. And that was military.

DePue: I know you were involved in ROTC. Did that happen before or after Pearl Harbor?

Steele: Pearl Harbor, 1941 in December, 1941, the seventh of December, and I remember standing in the north side of the front room in that fraternity house next to a grand piano. I remember the exact spot when we got word the Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbor, and the damage that had been incurred. And then reality set in. We were in it now for sure. And then of course the President spoke the next day; and we were in it, we had declared war.

DePue: It must have been a really different kind of experience because you're surrounded by young men your age from a farm background, just the perfect kind of skills that the military would find useful. Was there a lot of conversation or a sense among all of you that this had incredible repercussions for your futures?

Steele: We didn't look at it negatively. First of all, I'd never had a relationship with armed forces until I went to the university, and the first two years were mandatory ROTC. [Reserve Officers Training Corps] And I suspect, because my brother-in-law had been ROTC in field artillery, I chose field artillery. What did I know about the Army? Nothing. I thought, if Bob thinks artillery's the place to go, that's where I'll be. Then everyone in the house was in uniform, either ROTC—everybody for two years in our junior/senior year –then you'd be either in advanced artillery, or some of them were in the band or chorus. So we were all in uniform in that sense. So

there was this common thing of, you weren't afraid, but you also perceived that you're going to be in training in some kind of activity before too long.

DePue: You know, it didn't occur to me until you mentioned it –correct me if I'm wrong here –you were in ROTC from the very beginning because University of Illinois is a land grant college and that's part of what a land grant college's students are required to do, is be in ROTC?

Steele: Yeah. Or in the band or the glee club.

DePue: Okay. Did you take the ROTC stuff very seriously that first year or two?

Steele: Yes I did. Yeah. I did.

DePue: Did you like it?

Steele: Yes I did.

DePue: What was it that you liked about it? Because it's certainly different from being on the farm, I would think.

Steele: Yes indeed. But there is a relationship. You grow up with this discipline and you didn't feel you were disciplined, but you grew up with an obligation. When you first get up in the morning, you go out and feed the livestock and you milk the cows. You don't nourish your own body first, you go take care of the animals first. You relied upon the animals for your very being. The horses for the power, the cows to give the milk, to bring you the paycheck or to nourish your body, the chickens for the eggs. Every species had its purpose in this farm, and we were disciplined to immediately take care of those animals, because without those animals, we'd be destitute. So there was a built in discipline. Regimentation, if we might say that. But you looked at it as an obligation. And I think then, with the military, when you had the shine the brass, when you had to have your trousers well creased, when you stood at attention, when you responded to orders, was different for certain. But I didn't take offense to it. I did it more with pride. I wanted that brass to be shined for two reasons. I knew I was going to be inspected [both laugh] and I didn't want a demerit. And also you felt good to be doing what you were supposed to do, because you looked better.

DePue: When did you start thinking more seriously about the military?

Steele: At the end of my sophomore year, in the spring of '42, I enlisted. At that time, they offered you the opportunity to enlist or quite likely go on active duty, but the active duty I don't really think resounded very much in my ears as a threat. It was more like, if I enlist, I know I'm going. If I don't enlist, maybe I won't be going. Maybe I'll be sent back to the farm. I didn't know. Because they needed farmers to produce food also. So I enlisted, I think, out of just as—you know, boys will get together. At this time, I guess we're called young men. We'd talk things over. What are you going to do? Well, I'm going to enlist. That's a good idea. Why? Well, I think it's

the right thing to do. Just the right thing to do. My younger brother's there, he can help on the farm. That was my case. So that seemed to be the routine. Knowing then, that we would find out on a later date, if we enlisted then we'd have one more year in college. But I don't know that I knew that when I enlisted.

DePue: Had you thought at that time, you were in ROTC already, why not pursue getting a commission?

Steele: Didn't think that far ahead.

DePue: Okay. When did you actually start basic training then?

Steele: Started basic training in June 1943.

DePue: A full year later.

Steele: Yeah..

DePue: Why such a delay?

Steele: Don't know. Yeah, it was a full year later. What was your question?

DePue: Why was it a year's delay before you started basic training?

Steele: I suspect, from Washington. They knew how many people they needed, they knew how many were enlisting, they knew how many they were going to draft, and they knew how rapidly they could build up the forces to sixteen million. It took a lot of planning. And they just didn't need my age group at that time in the avenue that I was pursuing.

DePue: I suspect that the Army had been so tiny before that, that they couldn't possibly train everybody that first year anyway.

Steele: No, they couldn't. No way.

DePue: And in that interim year then, you stayed in school?

Steele: Stayed in school. That's right. A lot of the fellows left. Upperclassmen are gone; they were in uniform. We got pictures back. Some of them were in North Africa, our first engagement in Europe.

DePue: Yeah, that would have been the fall of '43. Still in your mind that you're going to go to the field artillery?

Steele: Oh Yes. yeah.. I had that red patch.[chuckles]

DePue: I take it you were fine with that?

Steele: Yeah. It seemed the right thing for me to do.

DePue: Okay, so tell me a little bit about basic training once you got there.

Steele: Basic training was at Fort Sill, Oklahoma. First time I'd been in Oklahoma. And they made it elective. What did we want to do in basic training? And they gave us a list: you could be a motor mechanic, you could be on a gun crew, you could be with maintenance, quite a few different things.

DePue: Fire direction?

Steele: Yes. I decided: on the farm, by golly, I know a little bit about engines. So I went into motor mechanics and did basic training. Now there's another little odd thing that happened. [laughs] That's the only way to describe it; it was odd. And I paid the penalty. All of us in our junior year, when we went active duty we were all buck sergeants, but you don't wear your grade. Don't ask me why; it was something from Washington. And maybe Illinois was the only state, I don't know. But we all went in as buck sergeants as we went for basic training, but we didn't wear our rank. Aha! One day at mail call, Private so and so, Private so and so, Private so and so, Sergeant Steele, Private—**oh! You come with me**. You're impersonating a noncommissioned officer. And that sergeant took me in to see the Battery Commander, and the Commander had that letter right there from my mother, Sergeant Steele, because that's what I was. [both laugh] The captain said, "Soldier, would you explain this?" I said, "Yes sir. I am a sergeant." And I explained to him that when our class left the university in ROTC, we were all put in as buck sergeants. He looked down, he said, "Well, you're right. Put your chevrons on and you're going to be a sergeant, and you're going to carry out all the duties of a sergeant. And in the morning, I want you to conduct the close order drill." I thought, Holy mackerel. I was out in the woods all night shouting orders. [both laugh] I had never led anybody in close order drill! Oh man! So the other buck sergeants, you know, said, Here's a green guy, we'll take care of him. So I was always, in the barracks, always responsible to keep the barracks clean when they went on into town. So I paid the price.

DePue: Tell us a little bit about the drill sergeants you had in basic training.

Steele: They were different than the drill sergeants at the university. The drill sergeants at the university had been lifelong regular Army personnel. They were spit and polish, they were gentlemen, they were courteous, firm when need be, but gentlemen. My very first encounter with a PFC was at the Indoctrination Center in Michigan at Fort Custer. We had just gotten off the bus and been issued our uniforms and he says—the PFC—he said, You refer to me as sir. From now on, I am sir to you greenhorns. And I thought, a PFC? Call him sir? Well, I also knew that if you didn't call him sir, you'd probably be in the kitchen working KP. So we all called him sir. I thought, What a ridiculous way! [laughs] So we were there in that indoctrination center for a number of days before we shipped out to Fort Sill. There I found, with a noncommissioned officer there, also very professional in their demeanor. But I also found that they looked over this new group with inquisitiveness and they found I was the greenest guy in that whole outfit. Now I'm embarrassed to tell this story,

but I will. In Fort Sill, Oklahoma, in the summertime it is **hot** and it is **dry**, and you march out there about five to ten miles and go through an infiltration course. An infiltration course is up over the walls and then on your belly through that hot sand underneath barbed wire; they shoot over the top of you with machine guns. And this sergeant came up to me, he's the buck sergeant, as a real friend he said, "Steele, you know, tomorrow it's going to be **hot** out there and that soil is **so**—he didn't call it soil—that dirt is **so** hot it'll put blisters on your belly, so wear your winter underwear. [DePue chuckles] That'll give you some extra, extra protection. So the next morning we were in close order, ready to go, and he comes up to me. "Did you get your underwear on?" "Yes Sergeant, I've got it on." "Good," he said, "take a little of this Red Man [chewing tobacco] and tuck it in there behind your cheek". That'll keep your mouth moist. So a sucker again, I took the Red Man and tucked it there. And we started marching up to the infiltration course, and I'd say a quarter of a mile and I didn't need any more of that Red Man so I got rid of that. I had all the moisture I needed. And when we got out to that infiltration course, I was soaking wet from perspiration, [both laughing] and when I went underneath that barbed wire I think I left a greasy trail. It was mud. [both laugh] So I learned the lesson the hard way, you don't believe everybody. I was told—remember what I said earlier—I was told you believe the minister, the judge, the teacher, the doctor. But you don't believe a sergeant in the Army. [[laughing] You use your own head.

DePue: Yeah. He had, perhaps, some ill will in store for you, huh? [both laugh] Well, that's great. How long were you at Fort Sill then for basic?

Steele: I was at Fort Sill until that fall, and the federal government decided that this nation needed more professional people in the way of engineers, and so they took us back in body from our class back to the University of Illinois to become engineers. Our fraternity was full of women, but the Beta house was empty and so I became a roommate with one of my fraternity brothers in the powder room of the Beta house just to become an engineer. [both chuckle] We were indoctrinated into engineering with high math that I couldn't even pronounce, and we had one elective. And that one elective course, I took an Ag Economics. But all the others were in the engineering school.

DePue: But their intention was still to have you be an enlisted engineer after this?

Steele: Well, their intention was to give us an education in engineering and then dispose of us whatever seemed to be the appropriate thing at that time. Probably be combat engineers, I'm not sure. We weren't told what was going to happen to us.

DePue: But you were still enlisted through this whole thing?

Steele: Yeah, right. Still in uniform, still a sergeant.

DePue: Now you mentioned earlier, ASTP. Is that the name of this training program?

Steele: Army Specialized Training Program, yes. That was a nationwide one.

DePue: Okay. And was that just for engineers?

Steele: Just for engineers, to train engineers. As far as I know. That's as far as I know.

DePue: How long were you at Illinois then, for this program?

Steele: Well that program didn't last very long. It just lasted through the winter. When spring came, they abandoned the program, and back to Fort Sill I went, and that time on a gun crew, 75 millimeter World War I pieces.

DePue: Which at that time was a decent size weapon, but not the big stuff, though.

Steele: No, no, not the big stuff. And we were firing for the OCS students. [Fire missions conducted to give training opportunities for students learning to call in and adjust artillery fire]. And I remember one day we were out firing problems and my position was: send the ammunition home, into the breech.

DePue: You were the loader?

Steele: Yeah, loader. And the gun crew next to us, when they fired, doggone! The whole rifle came loose from the breech and went sailing out the back end. Lucky nobody was hurt. Lucky, just plain lucky. We didn't wear hearing protection; we didn't put anything in our ears for blast. We just went out there and fired problems.

DePue: How long were you doing that?

Steele: Well, until they decided they didn't need anymore artillery officers but they sure needed them in the infantry. They needed more cannon fodder in the infantry, so we were transferred from Fort Sill, Oklahoma to Fort Benning, Georgia. Went through basic training there in the infantry.

DePue: OK. So you went from Fort Sill with a lot of your other brethren. You went up to the University of Illinois with a group of people?

Steele: Yeah.

DePue: Were all of these former University of Illinois college students that you went up there with?

Steele: As far as I know they were all University of Illinois, but I can't swear that that was true with all of them. But I know a lot of them were.

DePue: Okay, and then this same group went back down to Fort Sill and worked on gun crews?

Steele: Right.

DePue: Then was this same group sent out to Fort Benning, Georgia?

Steele: Nope. There were a few—like my roommate in the Beta house –he was selected, soon after we got there the second time at Fort Sill, to go to OCS. The rest of us were on gun crews. We would also go to OCS. But he got through one of the last classes. But I'd like to tell you a story on him. His name is Ken Gorden, and another brother-in-arms was Bill Bettenhausen; we were like the three musketeers in the artillery. One weekend, Bill and I said, Let's go to Oklahoma City for the weekend. We'll stop by and see Ken at OCS and he'll go with us. So we went over to see Bill in a tarpaper shack. We called them that; they were square billets. I think there were six men to a building, and they were tarpaper on the outside. We said, "Ken, let's go, let's go down to [Fort] Sill." He says, "I can't." "What do you mean you can't?" Now here's a man that was very, very—an excellent student, he had great habits, he was very neat, he was the kind of person that was so meticulous. "I can't go." "Why can't you go?" He said, "I've got three demerits and I'm confined to quarters for the weekend." And we both let loose with loud guffaws. "You, Kenny, are confined to quarters? How did you get three demerits?" Well, he says, "This morning, Saturday morning. The TAC officer found a broom straw under my cot. That's a demerit. The broom straw was not parallel to the boards. That's two demerits. And he found some dust on the broom straw. That was three demerits." That's discipline. [both laugh] True story, right, true story.

DePue: It's really funny when it's happening to somebody else, I'm sure.

Steele: Oh yeah. [laughs]

DePue: When did you get to Fort Benning, Georgia?

Steele: I'd have to look at my record for sure, but it would have been in the spring of 1944.

DePue: Okay, so you've been in the Army for over a year now. About a year.

Steele: About a year.

DePue: And trained, and trained again.

Steele: Trained three times.

DePue: And what did you do once you got to Fort Benning?

Steele: Started back to point one, basic training, infantry. And it was tough.

DePue: Well, basic training, infantry, suggests you went through enlisted training.

Steele: That's absolutely right. And I was no longer a sergeant.. They cut us back in rank and I think I'm now a PFC.

DePue: Why didn't they send you directly to the Officer Candidate School?

Steele: Because we had to train in basic infantry. If we'd have gone through OCS, there were two kinds of students there: ROTC students or enlisted men that had earned the right through their competence to become a candidate for OCS. We weren't either.

DePue: But they had no intention other than to have you go through the infantry basic course so you can get into their Officer Training Course?

Steele: Correct.

DePue: Okay. Was infantry basic training different from field artillery basic training?

Steele: Yes. Physical. Physical! They really worked you into condition. And weaponry. You had to know weaponry, you had to be able to take that rifle apart and put it together blindfolded. But you also had to take bayonet training. You had to go over infiltration courses. It was a combination of physical, mental, and weaponry. And when you did weaponry, you included machine guns, rifles, and all the attachments.

DePue: Hand grenades?

Steele: Hand grenades as well as going into gas chambers –how to use a gas mask.

DePue: By the time you got done with infantry basic training, did you feel that you were more inclined, better suited, for infantry or artillery? Just by your personality and your preferences.

Steele: Infantry.

DePue: Why?

Steele: Personal contact. You worked together as a team in skirmishes. On the other hand, in the artillery you worked together as a team on that piece. But there was more of a human relationship in the infantry. And teamwork, absolute teamwork for everything. Your survival depended on teamwork. In the artillery, there's that big old hunk of metal there that you had to operate as a team. That's a good question you ask. And I don't know that I really thought of it that well. But it was the training, basic training and OCS, we were never taught to hate the enemy. We were taught teamwork, to win. I wanted to go into combat because our country was at war and because of the kinds of training we received, I felt an obligation. There's something that happens to a soldier on Saturday morning when you're in close order drill in the infantry, when a or the lieutenant or whoever's in command is counting cadence, and you hear the band, and you see Old Glory, and you salute. You know you are committed to your country. Not because anyone forced you to but because of the various procedures fitting together. In the Army, you didn't go hungry. You had medical aid if you needed it. So it was strictly voluntary.

DePue: Okay, we're going to pause here real quick.

(break in audio)

DePue: Well, here we go here. OK, we took a very quick break. We talked quite a bit about basic training. Tell me a little bit about the Officer Candidate School.

Steele: That's a whole new ballgame. Officer Candidate School was taught by officers who were specialists in their assignment. Some were involved in what we call TAC officers. They did not lead discussions on Army routines and procedures, but they watched a certain number of candidates on deportment, on observation, on how they did certain things, and would keep records; whereas the lecturers would be specifics on the various elements of infantry training. So you were under observation all the time except those short hours when you were asleep. And I say this is good; it's good because you were busy all hours of the day except for a few hours at night. And for lectures, you'd sit in a series of wooden bleachers. And the lecturer would have before him the name of every candidate exactly where that candidate was sitting. So when he saw fit to ask a question, he would know exactly, "Candidate Smith, what's the answer to—" so and so, and so and so? And so you felt under strain all the time that by heavens you'd better be thinking, you'd better be listening every minute because you don't know when you're going to be called upon. When that whistle blew first thing in the morning, out of the sack you got and took a shower real quickly and you were down standing in formation. A quick breakfast and you're going to classes, whatever they might be for that day. Sometimes we would go on bivouac in the areas. Sometimes we would go on forced marches. Whatever the training happened to be. Or other days we'd be breaking down the rifles or the machine guns or out on the firing range. So it was seventeen weeks of stress. I really didn't think about the stress so much then, until many, many years later. My good friend, Rocco C. Siciliano –alphabetically we're quite close together –Rocco graduated number one in his class from Utah State University, and Rocco said, "Steele, you just met one of the most mixed up guys you've ever, ever known. I am a first generation Italian, I'm Catholic, and my father has a restaurant just across the street from the Mormon Tabernacle in Salt Lake City." (laughter) One in his class. And every so often or even more often, Rocco would receive a big box of food from his dad, and Rocco would say, "Come on gang and let's eat." Ooh! Rocco has written book; his book is thick because of what happened after the war. A very, very successful man. But I want to continue the story for just a moment to say this. I next met Rocco in Vienna after the war, because he went to the 10th Mountain Light in Italy during the war because of his background. He knew Italian; it's where his folks came from. We met in Vienna after the war. The next time I met him was in Washington D.C. He's now a lawyer, and I met him at the Mayflower Hotel, he and his wife Marian. He said, "Steele, now I'm even more mixed up; I just married a Jewish girl." [both laugh] Rocco, I mention this because in his book – as bright as he is – he said, "One of the most difficult periods in my life was in OCS. I didn't think I was going to make it. I didn't think I was going to be able to pass all those difficult duties assigned to us. I didn't think I could." And when I read that book I said, I'm a son of a gun! I never thought about not making it. But then I read a letter that I sent home to my Dad and Mother, and there it is in black and white. I just read it two weeks ago, one of my letters. "I don't know if I'm

going to make it here, but if I don't I will be back in the ranks of the infantry as an NCO or as a private." Now, Rocco remembered that but I didn't. Reading his book, I too was under stress. But it didn't stay with my memory bank; back to the farm, perhaps. You did what you had to do. You're disciplined. In that stress of OCS, you didn't know from one day to the next if I would make it, because if you made a mistake—the wrong kind of mistake—you're out. A lesser mistake—you get three chances to go out. And I think it's important to know, from my point of view, that this was a tremendous educational experience of nothing that I'd ever thought about as a boy on the farm, as a kid in high school, or as a little bigger kid at the university. The greatest growing experience I could have. It left all those others way in the dust. The kind of leadership to teach us to be a fighting team. Because you mess up in combat, you could cost somebody else his life. The staff officers knew how, through their experience, to grade people and how much pressure to put on them, and the way to train them to be a team and to win without hate. And I'd say, that's a great big plus. A gold star for these people that were a nucleus of the 16 million trained in our nation, in all branches of service.

DePue: Was Fort Benning the only place that they were manufacturing infantry lieutenants at the time?

Steele: Far as I know, it was.

DePue: This place must have really been popping when you were there.

Steele: Yeah. It was.

DePue: Because there's no branch that they go through lieutenants more quickly than infantry. What did your parents think about you now, being trained as an infantry lieutenant at the very time they're reading about the horrendous casualty rates in places like North Africa and Italy and later on in Normandy?

Steele: The only way I can answer that is if my folks had kept daily memorandum. I would suspect like Margie and I when our son Greg was in the infantry training to go to Vietnam, every day we'd have prayer. Lord, help take care of him, teach him, guide him. But they never said anything to me. I didn't keep Mother's letters and Dad's letters like they kept mine. I got a whole stack of them. But I would suspect as long as I was the only one of the three brothers to be in uniform, they would have been apprehensive. My older brother was manufacturing ammunition out in Nebraska, so he didn't exactly have a picnic either.

At the stage when I was in OCS there were a lot of gold stars hung out. [flags in the windows of homes of soldiers who lost their lives] The soldiers, airmen, Navy that didn't make it, casualties. And I'm sure the greatest solace was to keep busy. Beyond that, prayer is about the only avenue.

DePue: Would you consider yourself at that time, religious?

Steele: I'm taking a little time to answer it. I grew up in a household where every Sunday you went to Sunday school and church. Every Sunday, unless you was sick. And you had to be really sick. When I was in college, I went to church most every Sunday. When I was in the Army I went when I felt able, when I got my rest back to a reasonable level. I did not pray very much. I tell you why, Mark. I never felt like asking God for something because I felt that I should do my part. I'd only ask God to do something when I had reached my limit and couldn't go any further. But I knew I hadn't gone far enough or I needed help that I couldn't provide. But in routine, no, I didn't, I didn't think that was the right thing to do.

DePue: What was your denomination that you grew up with?

Steele: Congregational. Protestant. That was **the** church in Dover. And I guess I was fourth generation as a member.

DePue: Well, and that makes sense, because your ancestors came from Connecticut. That was very much Congregational territory out there. Okay. What happens after you complete Officer Candidate School?

Steele: I'm home about a week. Then I go to North Carolina. My first visit to North Carolina. I went to Camp Butner, and I went directly to a division. Heretofore I'd gone to training, training, training. Now I'm with a division, an infantry division. And this division had been in existence in World War I, brought to life for World War II, and had been used for, I'll call it Army research. They used it as a light division, a triangular division. A light division maybe to go to Italy where all the guys walked, jeeps, no heavy equipment. You pull the artillery or use horses, but mostly human power. And after a period of time they gave that up.

So when I joined it it was a triangular division with the same two-star general, General Finley, who had been in charge of that division for some years. But a lot of change in personnel. When I went to I Company 3rd Battalion 353rd Infantry; I replaced a lieutenant in the 2nd Platoon who no doubt was sent over to Europe to fill a needed slot in combat. Some of the fellows had been there since the division had first come into being, but most were replacements for the last two or three years.

DePue: I would guess the division was first formed up—for the second time around—in 1942.

Steele: Yeah, at Camp Carson, Colorado. And they went on maneuvers in Louisiana

DePue: Fort Polk, Louisiana. Now tell me if I'm wrong here. But I know the standard cycle for all of these divisions –practically for the entire United States Army –is you formed up and then somewhere along the process somebody made the decision: we need some people. So they would swoop down and take a lot of the leadership, a lot of the good people, and pull them out. Then they'd start building up again. Then they'd come down again and they'd pull some more people out. So you were constantly at the same stage. Well, first of all was that an accurate portrayal?

Steele: Yes, I'd say very accurate. And that's officers too. And quite a few of the officers—and I speak now of lieutenants, captains, mainly captains from there on up through majors and lieutenant colonels and colonels. Some were National Guard and some were reserves. Our company commander happened to be a manager of a five-and-ten-cent store. He was trained in coast artillery and here he is an infantry trainer and leader. But he'd never had basic training in infantry. That's not good. That wasn't his fault; he was assigned as a rifle company commander..

DePue: I guess that's one of the points that I was trying to see or get your reaction to, is that that doesn't necessarily make for high-quality training all the time.

Steele: Not in that phase. I'd had high quality before. Here we have a different meaning for the word training. Before, it was training you from the basics to discipline to knowing weaponry, et cetera. Now you're training is actually what you're going to do in combat. So the training phase here is to go through with your rifle on a trail and up pops an enemy. **Bang**. And you shoot it. Now that's obviously a target of a man; it's a silhouette of a human. You're in the final training for combat.

DePue: Well, I must confess I've spent a lot of years myself as an Army trainer. So I want to get your reaction to this question. I want you to gauge the relative quality of your training as an individual soldier versus your training at squad and platoon level tactics versus your training that you received at company and higher level.

Steele: The quality of training in the infantry, in basic training was mechanical in weaponry, mechanical in targets, mechanical on the gas mask, mechanical on the bayonet, mechanical on manning machine gun. But when it came to tactics, then it involved camaraderie. It involved orientation on a proper tactical operation and tactical procedure where you had to use your head as opposed to being more mechanical and operational. When we go to higher level, as you'd mentioned officer training—now you had an elevation in the leaders: in scope and in feeling of responsibility. It's not just for your own well-being, your own salvation, your own survival, but the responsibility of others. How now can you win a skirmish with low casualty rates? That's a different kind of a skill for the instructor. I would repeat what I said before: the instructors of this phase, in few instances, had combat experience. as opposed to that strong muscular World War I veteran that had used that bayonet in World War I against the Germans, and he's now teaching us how to use that bayonet; he was a great instructor, he was muscle-bound, strong, he'd hold that rifle straight out here with a bayonet on and not quiver. And you'd say, "My God, I hope I don't ever get that guy for an opponent. I can't give you a short answer –but by example I'd say there were skill levels at every phase, but in a different sort of manner. I want to answer you this way too.

Did I feel as a graduated second lieutenant, did I feel combat ready to lead 41 men against a German opponent group? Yes. I did. But the first day in combat I decided I didn't know so dang much as I thought I did. [both chuckle]

DePue: Well, I'm laughing, but it sure was pretty darn serious that first day. How long were you with the division before the division shipped overseas?

Steele: I joined the division the mid part of October. And we went to staging area to board the ship the end of December. So that's about sixty, seventy days.

DePue: Not that long. And were you involved in pretty rigorous training during that timeframe?

Steele: Oh yeah. OCS was rigorous.

DePue: It's a different ballgame now for you. Where did you ship out from?

Steele: Boston. As a whole division. Thirty-six ships in that convoy including the Navy ships that were protecting our flanks.

DePue: Tell me a little bit about the experience of being shipped overseas on a troop transport, I would guess, a Liberty ship maybe.

Steele: Yeah, converted Liberty ship. The Liberty ship was built to haul heavy loads. Humans are not a heavy load, so you're like a cork. And for eleven or thirteen days, whatever it was, we're in rough seas. Heavy seas. Storms the whole way. Front of that ship would go underwater. Then it would come up. Then it would ride and wiggle because the screw was out of the water. Vibrate. And down you'd go and up you'd come, and then you'd have a round roll. And up and down. And we had, as I mentioned, the Navy on our flanks. Probably in the rear. Probably one in the front. And these Navy ships were destroyers. They'd go clear out of sight in the swells. I thought, daggone, and I don't know how to swim. [both laugh]

I must tell you two other phases. On the voyage my platoon was responsible down in the mess area. We didn't cook, but we kept the place clean. We had to keep the trays cycling to be washed and keep the floor clean.. And with the heavy seas it was a tough task. I remember one noon the menu was hot dogs, sauerkraut and peaches. You stood up to eat. The table was at the proper height and there was about a half-inch lip around it to hold the trays.

In the center of that room was a big jerrycan to dump the trays, but there better not be much food because somebody was there watching. And during that day when that ship was lurching, one of the fellows dropped his tray and stepped on a peach and away he went and he took a whole bunch with him. Now this was wintertime and you're in ODs. [olive drab] Wool clothing. Then the ship goes back the other way, and down they go the other way.

By then the stuff on the floor is getting pretty deep. Soon there's a whole bunch of guys going from one side of that ship to the other because the floor is so slick they can't get a solid footing. We had black troops up front. Now this is the point in time in history where we didn't intermingle, even in combat. They kept them pure. Word pure. These fellows were one floor higher in the front of that ship

– and you know how stench rises – they were in the front of the ship on the top. They opened that hatch to come down and up goes that stench. You could just see those eyes get big and those stomachs roll. And they weren't hungry a bit. Whatever your color was, that's the way it'd have been. So that was not a pleasant experience.

One of our lieutenants right out of West Point, Frederick H. Black III, got on that ship when it was still tied up in Boston. Fred sat down on a five-gallon bucket and held his head and started to groan before it was even untied. And that poor guy stayed that way the whole voyage. On that same bucket. Oh, gosh. [laughs] But I'll tell you more about Frederick H. a little later.

DePue: Did you manage to keep your own cookies down during this trip?

Steele: I never lost them once. I came close when I went into the head and the ammonia hit me and I just about lost it. I swallowed in time and never got sick.

DePue: You must have been one of the very few that can say that.

Steele: Yes I was. One of my sergeants was at that can in the center of the mess hall. I don't think he ever lost his. He had the strongest stomach I could imagine. He could be eating a sandwich with his right hand, holding a guy's head while he urped in that can with the other, and laugh at the same time. [both laugh]

But I want to tell you this story. For some reason, while on board that ship I bought a hunting knife at the ship's store. It was in a leather sheath. I'd never hardly hunted. I'd shot a few rabbits. That was it. But I wasn't a hunter. Something told me to buy that knife. And every extra moment I sharpened it. When we got to the end of that voyage I could shave with that knife. What do you suppose was my first order in combat?

DePue: Well, I've heard you tell the story before.

Steele: My first order in combat by the battalion commander. Take your platoon at 0500 in the morning and attack the enemy with knives and bayonets. Isn't that a coincidence?

DePue: That's just the kind of order you never want to hear in the first place.

Steele: No. Particularly when you think there are 300 out there, and you're forty-two.

DePue: Where in Europe did you land?

Steele: We landed at Le Havre, France. We were heading for England to reorganize and get things in place. But because of the Bulge and the way the Germans were giving our troops hard times, our convoy was the first to go from the States directly into Le Havre to unload, get on trucks, and get up to the front.

But that's not the way it happened. Because for some reason unknown to me, our artillery was not in that convoy. So we trained when we should have been in combat, waiting for the artillery.

DePue: If I understand you correctly, the Battle of the Bulge was going on while you were shipping overseas.

Steele: Yeah.

DePue: Did you know about that? Were they able to receive any communications?

Steele: No.

DePue: So you didn't hear about that until after you got to France. As you're heading on over, what's your assumption about the future of the war in Europe? Did you figure that the Germans were pretty well beaten?

Steele: No. No. That Bulge in my mind said, "Those guys have got a lot of go, yet."

DePue: But this is before you even heard about the Bulge occurring.

Steele: Well, we were going to war. We didn't really have a picture. All we knew for sure is there's still lots of war going on over there. And I couldn't put into focus anything other than that, going to war.

DePue: Okay. What kind of training did you do while you were waiting for the field artillery?

Steele: Very basic. Calisthenics. Marching. Clean the weapons. I inspect the troops. Trench foot's going on; I'd inspect all my platoon all the time to make sure that they're taking proper care of their health, their bodies. If you don't keep busy you get in trouble.

DePue: But no small unit maneuvers? Nothing like that?

Steele: No.

DePue: Okay. When did you head to the front?

Steele: I can't give you the specific date but let me tell you a story first. We lived in tents there in France. We went from the ship out to open semi-trucks on a daggone cold night. We'd been to that nice warm ship. And now it was wintertime in France. I'm going to guess it was midnight when we debarked. Went down rope ladders. It wasn't a real rope entanglement, that's not the right word, but you know what I mean.

DePue: Cargo nets.

Steele: Yeah, thank you. With full field pack down that cargo net. Out of that nice warm ship. Got on these open trucks and drove for hours to this tent camp. Tents sides were rolled up. Cots were bundled up. And no newspapers to protect yourself from the cold.

About froze to death that first night as I expect everybody else did. But eventually we got those tents sort of taken care of. We had briquettes we put in the stove. And every Saturday night—we'd save briquettes through the week –and on Saturday night we'd get the stove going and we'd each take a nice bath out of our helmets. Get the snow and melt it. Take a bath. And I'd mentioned Frederick H. Black, Jr., who was out of West Point. He told the captain he didn't really need a bath that night. So the captain, breaking all rules of etiquette and rules of West Point, called him Stinky. [chuckles] That was not a very good idea. Hey, Stinky, how are you getting along? That four years of West Point really didn't deserve that. But being from the five-and-ten-cent store seemed to fit. [both chuckling] So depends on your background.

A few nights later in that same tent, I blew out my candle. We each blew out our candle, right down to the old man. He's the Company Commander. Call him the old man. He'd just leaned over to blow out his candle and there was a skirmish at the end of the tent where he was. It had opened up—and I never saw so many stars shining at night in my whole life—a t two-star general came in, and the old man tried to get up to salute in his long johns. The general says, "At ease, at ease. Are you Captain Iglehart?" "Yes sir." And he saluted him from the prone position. He said, "At ease, captain." He said, "Is Stinky here?" [laughs delightedly] Frederick H. Black's father, the two-star. He was in charge of artillery. [both laughing] Now I tell you, [laughing] that tent got really, really quiet when he said, "Is Stinky here?" [both laughing] I don't remember if the captain said anything. Quite likely he pointed. Oh Lordy, Lordy. I'll never ever forget that, nor will the captain.

Two days later Freddie was gone! Maybe it was the next day. The general knew that he was not in good hands. [both chuckling] Oh boy! Oh boy!.. So you do have surprises in uniform.

The other thing I'd mention about that tent. The facilities. You dug a hole eight feet square, eight feet deep. At an appropriate distance from the edge of that hole you drove a stake. So when it became necessary on a daily basis to keep your body healthy, you grabbed that stake with one hand and assumed the position. One night the wind was blowing. It was cooold. And in the middle of the night I heard, "Help! Help!" [both laughing] and I knew what had happened. Somebody had missed that stake. I thought, Oh, jeez. Oh. So that's part of Army life, I'll tell you.

DePue: Some of those stories are almost universal. Just like the stories that you always hear about heading overseas on the troopship. Okay. What happens after tent city?

Steele: We go up the coast to a French town called Le Treport. Le Treport is on the English Channel. I have pictures showing that village where the Germans had thrown up

concrete walls so that every street had a concrete barrier. So if the Allies attacked from England in the Straits of Dover, they would have had that city protected from quick invasion. There'd be a lot of obstacles. We trained there for a while. We were there just a matter of days.

Then the order came to board a train. So we boarded this train to go up front. These were the old French or German trains with cattle cars: forty-by-eights, forty men or eight horses. Probably my whole platoon get in one of those cars. And then up to Germany—up to the Moselle River. And near Alf, A-l-f. Our company was in a hotel. Not a plush hotel. There'd be a big room, they'd all be bunked down on the floor.

And I think it was the second morning there, the Company Commander told me to go out, find the enemy. Go out and see what I could find out about the enemy. Just go out and scout. So I took the company guide, staff sergeant. And I think three other men, three riflemen. And it was foggy that morning.

And we went out up on this high ground, but not being able to see too far because of the fog. All of a sudden we heard noises. We all got ready. And pretty soon here came one of the enemy. I gave the order and we shot. And the whole landscape broke up. We were like a tumbleweed in the wind getting out of there, because the bullets were flying. Thank goodness of the fog. They couldn't see us. But if it had not been foggy we could have seen them a lot earlier. These were German troops occupying the , high ground area of the river. They had been a holding a defense position for some time. They were dug in and they were ready, waiting.

DePue: Was this on the opposite side of the river then, from where you were located?

Steele: Same side. We only gained the high ground.

DePue: So this is on the eastern side of the Moselle River.

Steele: I can't tell you the direction because this was a horseshoe—

DePue: There's a very large distinct loop that the Moselle takes where you guys were operating.

Steele: Yeah. And that horseshoe was where it took place. That was the German location because they had a lot of good natural defense. The river. And then they held the high ground.

DePue: Was this your first combat experience?

Steele: That was the first time I'd heard a real live bullet from an enemy zinging past my ears.

DePue: And tell me again what you did when that—you said you were like tumbleweeds.

Steele: To get out of there, because the bullets were flying. Because we were not out there to annihilate the enemy. Just out there to find out information. We found all we needed to know. [both laugh]

DePue: Well, for the person who's listening to this, it might be worth noting that if you're on a reconnaissance mission or go locate the enemy, you're not supposed to necessarily be engaging them in combat, are you?

Steele: No. No. But there's times when you think it's proper.

DePue: Did you fire your weapon on that day.

Steele: Yeah.

DePue: In retrospect, when you got back to the company formation did you think you'd done a decent job?

Steele: I felt that I'd carried out my assignment in proper fashion.

DePue: Okay. Well, tell us what happens then in the next couple days after that.

Steele: That same night the battalion Commander called me. I didn't know it at the time, but he was a lawyer from Philadelphia who was in reserve.

DePue: Do you remember his name?

Steele: I normally would. But at the very moment right now I don't think of it. Hawkinson. Hawkins,—Colonel H-a-w-k-i-n-s-o-n.

He called me in to his headquarters, and he said, "Lieutenant Steele, I understand from Captain Iglehart that you carried out a mission today. Would you tell me about it?" So I repeated what we'd done. And he said, "How many—did you come in engagement with the enemy?" I said yes. "How many enemy do you believe there are?" I said, "Colonel, sir, from the rifle fire that took place I would estimate 300." And he thought about this. He said, "All right, in the morning I want you to have your platoon at this location on the map at this roadway and attack the enemy with knives and bayonets at 0500 in the morning." My reply was, "Yes sir." And I thought, My gosh, forty-two against 300.

And in the years that have gone by, Why did the battalion commander tell me this rather than my company commander? Why would this be? At that time I thought, Orders are orders. Must be pretty important, a battalion commander orders me to do it. He said, "You're the only one. You're the first one to come in contact with the enemy. So you go git 'em."

So I went back to the company and I talked to my platoon sergeant. A very good man, very good man. And I said, "Sergeant, our orders are to have this platoon attack the enemy with knives and bayonets at 0500 in the morning. So let's get

ready." And that's what we did. The Company Commander played a role. I'm not sure what it was. But I also knew we were going to have fire protection from our heavy weapons platoon, which took place—I'm not sure where they set up. I'm not sure how many yards they had to fire. And at the moment I don't remember. I suppose there were fifty-seven-millimeter mortars. That gave us more of a cover.

DePue: Otherwise it was just your platoon? It wasn't a company size attack?

Steele: No. No, just the platoon. And mortar cover at 0500. So it was not sneak attack. Very poorly organized. Because you can't have a sneak attack and use mortars. But that was our first day of combat. We were not seasoned troops. Before the day was over we not only had the company but we had the battalion, corps artillery, and the Air Force fighter pilots to bomb.

We'd gotten up at three o'clock that morning. And when we got back to headquarters it was four o'clock the next morning. And I lost quite a few men. And we evacuated one of my men. We and the enemy were throwing grenades at each other. That night was black. We were close enough together we would holler kindly words to our brethren Germans and we'd throw grenades. They were using round concussion grenades so you can throw those a long ways –a lot further than our grenades. And also when you're in the woods you got to be pretty careful if you can't see a tree. Because you could hit a tree with your grenade, it'll bounce back at you. So it was not a very fun experience. But one of those high concussion grenades came in and wounded one of my men. He was immobile, he was not able to walk, he was not able to function. But at the same time he was not in danger of immediate death. So we fashioned a carrier out of two rifles and a shelter half and got him back. We found a jeep someplace along the line put him on the hood of the jeep and worked our way back to headquarters.

Many, many months later we're back in France. The war is over. We're processing troops to go to the zone of interior or the CBI. And who do you suppose were some of our POWs that were washing and cooking and cleaning up? Some of those guys, those Germans from our first day in combat. Some of them were right there and they say, "Of all the war we were in that was the damnedest day we ever had." I thought that makes it true on both sides. [laughs]

DePue: Well, the way you've described this, it's something of a miracle that anybody survived from your platoon. How many were there on the German side? Have any sense of that today?

Steele: No.

DePue: How many casualties did your platoon sustain?

Steele: Quite a few, but I'm really not certain. I'd see bodies fly up in the trees from concussion.

DePue: Obviously you attack at 0500, this is a daylight attack. It's just dawn. Is it crossing open terrain? Were you crossing open fields? Or was it wooded terrain?

Steele: Both. Part of it was wooded. At that moment we were close to a tower. And I have a picture where you can see a very great tower. This was a park of some sort. And at that trail was our map reading. And it was open in front of us. There was this big tower. We'd been through the trees. Then there was an opening area and then more woods.

Later in the day I'm on the other side of that tower and we're going to make a frontal attack across this whole open area into the woods. Pretty heavy woods. This is after noon hour. The company then gives us coverage, fire coverage, and we run across this area. Meaning rifle and machine gun coverage. Now we went across and it's pretty wide and open. So about halfway across I stopped on my belly. It's on the side of a steep hill and I get my legs widened apart to hold myself as I shoot. I just happened to see the gravel and the dirt jumping up in front of me, and machine gun bullets went across right between my legs, I'd say a foot below my crotch. My knees didn't get a scratch. But I didn't wait there for the next burst. I was gone, on to the woods.

Didn't lose any men that afternoon.

DePue: This is a different engagement then.

Steele: Yeah. That afternoon.

DePue: Okay, okay. Was this the time frame when you won the Silver Star, or did that come later?

Steele: That was that day.

DePue: That day? Okay. Tell us about why you received the Silver Star.

Steele: Well, you never know why. You carry out the training you learned from Fort Benning. And the combat experience. Quote "simulated combat experience" you got there in North Carolina, Butner. And you do what your instincts tell you to do. But when you look at the written word it suggests that my platoon had obstacles. Some of these obstacles were placed there by the enemy who'd had quite some time to formulate a great defense system. That defense system would be placing antipersonnel mines with proper trip wires for their own defense, and we had to circumvent those. It also says that I had a wounded man I had to get out, so I just carried out my training experiences as best I could under real conditions. And that's about all I can say.

DePue: Mind if I read the citation? "First Lieutenant Harold Steele distinguished himself by gallantry in action in connection with military operations against armed enemy as a platoon leader of Company I, 353rd Infantry Regiment on 15 March, 1945 near Alf, Germany. As First Lieutenant Steele led his men towards formidable enemy

defenses which were supported by machine gun and automatic rifles, he and his platoon encountered a minefield. Personally reconnoitering a safe route, he led his men out of the area, and then resuming the attack, captured the first objective, killing ten men." That's what your platoon killed? Or that you personally killed?

Steele: Platoon.

DePue: "He then led the assault to the next objective, spurring his men forward despite enemy machine gun and sniper fire." Some of which went right between your legs I assume. "When his platoon was ordered to a new position, First Lieutenant Steele personally administered first aid to a seriously wounded man and helped carry him one and a half miles to safety. His courageous leadership, tactical skills and devotion to the welfare of his men reflected great credit upon himself and are in keeping with the best traditions of the Armed Forces of the United States."

Did that sound fairly accurate from what you recall?

Steele: It's hard for me to put into focus all the activity that took place that day. So I have to believe that written word was as accurate as could be accommodated. I'm not sure who all played a role in bringing those facts on paper. You have to—in a circumstance in warfare, particularly that early in your experience in real war as opposed to training –you're thinking and acting simultaneously to the best of your natural ability plus the skills you'd learned and now you're practicing the book and the written, spoken word to actuality. I don't remember all of it in detail at all. I remember a good share of it. So I suppose that has to be pretty accurate.

DePue: Your battalion commander had asked you to do something that any rational human being would say, "You're crazy." So how did you muster up the courage to do that?

Steele: That's one of the natural disciplines. You must have discipline in the Army to win. You have to have discipline to succeed. And I had believed from a second lieutenant to a lieutenant colonel, he must have known a lot of things I didn't know. So I felt I have an obligation to commit my men to an assignment that I know is extremely hazardous. because I'm ordered to do so. Quite likely that colonel's got some other aces up his sleeve, I hope, to divert some of that enemy in another direction.

DePue: Before you actually move your platoon into harm's way, what's going on in your mind?

Steele: Well, the first thing that went on in my mind, I wish to Sam Hill those dadgum 57 millimeter were about another 300 yards ahead of me. That's the first thing that went on in my mind. The second thing is, I automatically got what we call a walkie-talkie. They were a darn poor, a very poor communication device, but it's the best we had. I said, "Either increase your range or don't put any more of those damn things in my lap."

DePue: How far did you move forward before you started to take casualties?

Steele: We had our point of debarkation is 0500. And that's exactly when the rounds came in.

DePue: From the enemy.

Steele: No. Our own. Unless, of course, the enemy simultaneously in our position.

DePue: They were landing how close to you?

Steele: Front porch.

DePue: Ten, fifteen yards away. And you took casualties from friendly fire then? Again, now the natural urge would be to immediately do something to take care of those soldiers. What did happen after that?

Steele: That's when I immediately said, "Cease fire."

DePue: And then moved out and let somebody else take care of the injured that you'd left behind?

Steele: Yeah. We had medics at that stage.

DePue: Any doubt in your mind that the rest of the platoon would follow?

Steele: No.

DePue: And how far before you started taking casualties from the enemy?

Steele: Well, it wasn't long till we had assistance. I presume—I only presume—that the company commander then sent another platoon in. Or probably two more platoons. So we had company pretty soon after that fire.

DePue: So that sounds like it was preplanned to see how much resistance you would get and then put more forces in.

Steele: Yeah. But you see, there's a breakdown—my word, a breakdown—in command from—but I really shouldn't say that. Quite likely the battalion commander, after he gave me my orders, quite likely the battalion commander called the company commander in and repeated what I had told him and then told the captain, You better have some more ready. But you see, this really is not a very proper procedure in command. The captain should have been there at that same time so he would have known directly from my voice what I said. But that's like Saturday morning quarterback. And I say, none of us were combat ready in the sense of being experienced. We were combat ready from training. But I would also say that there was one sergeant in our company; he was a tech sergeant, a very very fine person. Fine meaning a robust soldier, a positive thinker, a clean-cut guy. And his goal was to get a field commission. After casualties in my platoon, he was one of those that didn't make it very much longer.

DePue: What was it like seeing some of your soldiers drop, being injured, being killed?

Steele: Well, when you see a body—that you knew—go flying up into the trees, that was easier to take than to see your medic get shot in the back. For a few days before, my medic said to me, (almost whispering)"I'm scared." And he had a German pistol. And I say, "Corporal, don't carry that pistol. There's an international known rule in law that you're protected because your helmet has four white background red crosses. You're a medic. And your sleeve, likewise. Whether they're German or American, all medics have these protections. You're there for one purpose, and you're not armed. So don't carry it." That afternoon he was going up a trail away from the enemy and a sniper got him square in the back. And the first thing he called out was, (in a very soft voice)"Lieutenant, Lieutenant, Lieutenant." I worked my way around to him. That's the first time I really ever saw the expression on a face of death, his entrails coming out of his back.

DePue: Did you feel a deeper sense of responsibility for his death?

Steele: Yeah.

DePue: Even than some of the others in your platoon?

Steele: Yeah. Because of our conversation before.

DePue: Was too personal that way.

What happens after this initial battle in Alf? Did you actually achieve the objective?

Steele: Well, we cleaned out—yeah, cleaned the Germans out. Years later. Years and years later, I'm talking with members of that company. These voices came from individuals who were in the proximity of our company commander, and those with whom we were taking the place, troops that had been there. And he said to our company commander, "Do not go in there, because they are dug in for keeps. Use extreme caution, because they're ready for you." Now if I'd known that that night, I might have had a different reaction. But I didn't know that. And again, in all defense to all the people involved, when you've never been in a real war before, real combat before, you make some decisions that are bad. Our captain probably thought, By God, so they're dug in; we're going to get them anyway. I don't know what he thought. I didn't hear the conversation. But from the boys that told me later, I guess it did take place.

So again that's Saturday morning quarterbacking. Everybody knew we were unseasoned. But even so, if you're trained to be an officer in the coast artillery and now you're in infantry, that's not his fault either. He should have been trained. That's not his fault. So where do you place fault? No one. No one's at fault. You just do the best you can, your best judgment under the conditions that exist.

DePue: And then if you do make mistakes you get to live with them for the rest of your life.

Steele: Yeah.

DePue: Going into the first combat, ask you yourself and what you think your buddies were feeling at the same time, any doubt in your mind that the United States would eventually be victorious?

Steele: You never thought about that. I never thought about it in that sense. I thought about only in the avenue you take every day at a time and the enemy is booming and we're under the command of General Patton. General Patton has developed and earned a great reputation of a topnotch tank commander and a topnotch winner in tactics. And his tactics are pretty basic. Keep the enemy in the defense. Keep pressure on him and keep him in the defense. Now one night later on, after this, to carry that out, first time we'd ever gotten a command to retreat. Dark, pitch dark that night. We got a command: Reposition yourself back here. Not retreat, but reposition yourself back here, we moved that way, because there's a Panzer division heading right for you.

We retreated to that position and dug in. Then we got an order. Proceed to the east. It was so dark that night, I couldn't see where my hand was and where the sky ended. Absolute pitch black. There's no way that anyone can command their troops in that darkness by aggressive action. Dig your foxholes further east. Extend your foxholes farther east. So I followed the order but only a foot. [both laugh]

DePue: Further east would mean you're moving towards the enemy.

Steele: That's right. In other words, I knew that was a ridiculous order. But as ridiculous as it was, I carried it out, but not to the extent they expected me to do.

DePue: Okay. So the first action was at the Moselle River. Is that in France?

Steele: That separates Germany from France and Belgium and—oh, that little—

DePue: Luxembourg.

Steele: Luxembourg, thank you.

DePue: Okay. I know the next major area that you have to deal with is the Rhine River. Did you see some heavy action between the Moselle and the Rhine?

Steele: No, it was pretty quiet between the Moselle and the Rhine. The enemy had taken up their positions in their last natural defense, the Rhine River, in the heartland.

DePue: Another one of the questions I wanted to ask you about. Going into combat for the first time, and after you've tasted combat for the first time, was there a sense that, okay, the Germans are on the rope, we're not facing the best of the Germany army before? Or what were your expectations?

Steele: You don't think about the best and the worst in kids. The only thing you think about is, whoever's pulling that trigger, that bullet can be just as deadly whether there's a whole bunch there or just one. I mean, you take each day and each occasion in the sense of good and solid tactics with a reasonable exposure to carry out your mission. And your mission is to go from point A to point B to point C that's identified on your map. You go from step to step with due caution, but yet with enough aggressiveness to keep the enemy on the defensive. Keep moving. And that of course comes from General Patton.

DePue: Had you heard about the atrocities that the Germans had committed during the Battle of the Bulge? I think Malmedy where they gunned down all the POWs?

Steele: No. Didn't hear about it. Didn't know about it.

DePue: Okay. But you did know you were facing a determined enemy.

Steele: Yes.

DePue: What was the combat like once you got to the Rhine? Were there any specific incidents there?

Steele: Yes. The night before we bivouacked on the high ground immediately adjacent to the very rugged quick drop area to the Rhine River. As I recall it was 700 or 900 feet above the river, was this high ground. It was a roadway adjacent to our bivouac area, a roadway that was was vineyards. The vineyards at that particular area where the vines were growing in terraces, and very very steep. We got up at three o'clock and by three-forty-five we were walking down. Full field packs. Extra bandoliers of ammunition. Winter clothing. We had trained on lots of different kinds of conditions, but never under this with walking down a steep roadway. If you've never done this, your foot will slip in your shoe at each step –your foot and your sock and your shoe –and there's a great deal of friction. The friction builds up heat, and with that heavy load on each foot it gets hotter and hotter. And it feels like the whole bottom of your foot is absolutely full of blisters. I'd see men, these grown men, tears going down their cheeks. I had really one old man; he was thirty-three. I figured he was so old he was never going to make it.[DePue chuckles] He was carrying a Browning automatic rifle. And, oh, he was hurting so bad. I said, "Here, give me that; you take my rifle." Officers at that stage were carrying a very light weapon.

And I had that BAR and I felt so bad for these guys. But yet they were in excellent physical condition. We got down to the river to cross under the cover of darkness, and in came the 88s. Adjacent to the river and parallel to the river there's a railroad track and a road, then up the hills go the roadways. This one road was parallel to the track, and the track parallel to the river. The river is wide there and very rapid. And we were going to cross in twelve-man engineer boats with oars. If there's any oar missing then you use the butt of your rifle for an oar.

And remember now. All this heavy and extra equipment. You get in the boat to cross the river. The river's moving rapidly, so you know it's going to take you downstream. Across the river is a village, Kaub. We were just ready to load into these boats. In came the 88s. The 88s were indirect fire and 30 millimeter direct fire. The 30 millimeter was from automatic weaponry.

So when the 88s lit up, into the boats we got, and started paddling across the river. And this is the first time I knew you could see from the business end of a bullet—a tracer. And you could see those suckers, those tracers, bullets coming right at you. Sweeping. Sweeping motion.

And of course the natural reaction is duck in the boat. What's it going to do? **Well, dang it, don't duck, keep the oars busy, let's get across this river, then we'll worry about the bullets.** (laughs) Only a little more emphatic. Incoming 30 mm hit those boats and they're gone. Fortunately we were okay. I lost a man who was the company runner. Real good young man.

DePue: Killed?

Steele: Yeah. Yeah, I don't know if he drowned or if he was killed with the 30 millimeter.. We then got ashore and then formed our line of skirmishers and went through the town and up through the vineyards to gain high ground again.

By this time many of the infantry troops had gone across; the Germans fell back further. I It was basically rugged open area for us. Then, as we gained elevation we were up on pretty flat ground, agricultural areas.

Now remember this was spring so there were no crops growing. You still are apprehensive because you never, ever know where the enemy's going to be. You don't know. It's not like walking across a flat piece of ground like a football field where you can see everything. There's always obstructions where the enemy can be hiding. So you have to take due caution. But with enough willingness to make some exposure so you can at least move on, and keep going. So that's where we were now.

DePue: I think we're already at two hours and eighteen minutes here, Harold.

Steele: Better speed up.

DePue: And I don't like to speed up. You still have some important stories to talk about. You have Ohrdruf that we need to discuss. Occupation of Germany. Of Europe. Meeting Margery. I think we should call it a day and I'll come up here some other time and do justice to your story.

Steele: I'd be pleased to.

DePue: Okay. Thank you very much, Harold.

(end of interview 1)

Interview with Harold Steele

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Interview # 2: September 12, 2008
Interviewer: Mark DePue

DePue: Today is September 12, 2008. My name is Mark DePue. I'm the Director of Oral History. I'm here with Harold Steele for part two of an interview I've had about your experiences during the Second World War. We spent quite a bit of time on growing up, especially growing up on the farm here as well. And that was certainly an important piece of history also. I know before we started you mentioned you wanted to talk about another relative.

Steele: Yes, Mark, I do. And I should not have forgotten this. But my grandmother's father, James Hensel, came to Dover about a mile and a half west and north from the home farm here in the year of 1853 with thirteen children from the state of Ohio.

DePue: Before we go too far, the name.

Steele: That's James Hensel, H-e-n-s-e-l. And during his farming career he gained ownership of 1,000 acres. The record does not give the fact, but one of those thirteen children, a boy—or a man as the case may be, the records are gone –it'snot known what happened to him. But the other twelve, including my grandmother, grew up on the farm. And at James Hensel's death in 1899 or 1900 each of them inherited eighty acres. One of those eighties then became part of this home farm at the northwest part of the farm. He was obviously a very successful farmer and with a very sizable family.

DePue: You used a phrase that caught my attention. I think it was "gained ownership," or "gained possession" of 1,000 acres. That leaves a lot to the imagination of how somebody gets that much land back then. How did he happen to acquire that?

Steele: He must have had a real skill on management of money, responsibility to the family, and obviously a tremendous producer and skill as a farmer, to save enough money to buy those acres. Of course in those days the land charges, costs per acre, were very minimal. But at the same time the income was also very minimal. So I

can't say anything more than it's in the record and that was achieved through hard work. He didn't inherit it from someone else.

DePue: Was some of it through land grant procedures at the time?

Steele: No, he was too late for land grant. But the first purchase that he did make came from his neighbor, Sylvester Brigham, who did gain some of that land through the land grant system.

DePue: Okay. So he wasn't too far behind that.

Steele: No he wasn't.

DePue: And he came from where again?

Steele: Came from Ohio. But remember now, this is five years after my paternal grandfather came to Dover, and he was too late also in 1848 for the land grant system in this particular area.

DePue: Yeah. There were land grant programs going on but it was in Kansas and farther west by that time.

Steele: Yes. It was all used up here.

DePue: Sure. Okay. We also wanted to pick up one other missing piece that we skipped over, and it was my fault. I know you had mentioned earlier that George C. Marshall addressed the troops before you embarked for France.

Steele: Yes he did. We as a division, the 89th Division, left our staging area where we trained before embarkation. We went to Boston area, and the order came down that all the officers of the 89th Division would assemble at a certain large auditorium there in the Boston area. General Marshall, the Army Chief of Staff, then addressed the officers.

One of the things that was the most keen in memory was, he said, "You must remember that we're in this war to win. We have allies. One of these allies certainly must be a question in your mind as to why should our country, the United States—that believes so fervently in the importance of the individual, the freedom of the people under the Constitution—we would have an ally that felt so differently toward freedom of citizens. It is essential our nation must be an ally with the Soviet Union because if we permitted the Japanese coming in from the west and the Germans coming in from the east and taking over the Soviet Union, the likelihood of us winning this war is very remote. So we've done such things as create the Lend - Lease program.

DePue: The lend-lease program?

Steele: –the lend-lease program. We send them the tools of warfare, including uniforms and helmets, tanks, six-by-sixes [trucks], ammunition. And as much training as they will permit." I thought of General Marshall's message many many months later when the war ended and we came face-to-face with our counterparts, the Russian infantry.

DePue: Can we hold off on that story until you get to that part of the narrative? Is that okay?

Steele: That's fine.

DePue: Now there's probably somebody screaming at me when they're listening to this that says, "No, let him tell the story." But I'm a chronological kind of guy.

Steele: I'm an illogical kind of guy. [both laugh]

DePue: Where we had left the story before in our last interview, your unit, the 89th, and this is the 353rd Infantry Regiment, had just crossed the Rhine River and it was a crossing under fire, as I remember correctly.

Steele: And I think we had also gone as far as Ohrdruf.

DePue: But we didn't talk about Ohrdruf at all. And was that the next part of the story we really need to be addressing?

Steele: If we finished discussing crossing the Rhine and going up the other side to the open area, then we'll go from there.

DePue: Okay. Let's pick it up from there then.

Steele: We often think of this particular calendar of time that the war was over. That the Germans were running in retreat. Well, to a great sense this is true. But it's also very important to keep in mind that the Germans were keen of mind in military operations. They were seasoned troops and they did all that they could to halt any advancement that the Allies made. So out in the open area, particularly when you came into some trees, quite likely they would be there in hiding. So we had to maintain a vigilance of awareness at every moment. One particular day, probably I'll say fifty, sixty miles, maybe a short week after crossing the Rhine, my platoon happened to be in the lead position of the company, and the company lead position of the battalion in this sector. I had my scout out front. At about eleven o'clock, I'd guess from 600 to 800 yards, there was low-profile buildings and some trees and German machine gun fire.

At the pace of our movement, it would have been—I don't know—ten, fifteen minutes perhaps, until we reached that point. And having heard the German machine gun fire, we advanced into that area with great precaution. But as we came to, oh I'd say 100 yards from there, I noticed two US recon vehicles. So this offered

us an opportunity of saying, Well, apparently the Germans are gone; some of our buddies are there. So we advanced rather quickly.

DePue: Were these recon vehicles from your unit or another organization?

Steele: I can't answer that. They would likely have been from the 89th Division but I can't say other than I don't remember what was on the bumpers, but these were friendlies.

DePue: And your platoon was otherwise in the lead of the formation moving forward.

Steele: That's correct. And so we went between the area of the vehicles and the first building. I suppose there were fifty yards perhaps in that area. I circle around to my left and here was an opening in the wall. The gate was open or whatever it could have been. And probably my scout and I went in about the same time, and there were no other Americans that I remember. But here in this open area of the enclosure were the bodies that had just been machine gunned. They were clothed in striped prisoner uniforms and their bodies were crumpled. And that was the first shock.

But then I looked over to my left and here was a high pile stacked like cordwood of many, many emaciated bodies. And as I walked over to that area, there was a deep hole, and there were more bodies covered with slaked lime. I knew it was slaked lime, because as a farmer when we had an animal die we'd dig a hole and put the slaked lime on the carcass. So it was very common for me to see that.

More of the fellows came through the gateway. We stood in horror to realize that this was a death camp and they'd obviously been short of nourishment, starved to death.. The bodies were just as I say, emaciated. And I can't remember all of the detail. But eventually others came, including our Battalion Commander, Regimental Commander, then to Division Commander, General Finley. With General Finley came General Patton. With General Patton came General Eisenhower. And by then, obviously other people had come. I think, the recon vehicle having certainly a far better communication system than we did in our small units, the word spread pretty fast.

DePue: With all these other people coming to include the high brass, was that a period of hours or a couple days afterwards?

Steele: No, same day, hours. I recall that in the afternoon General Eisenhower had given an order to General Finley that this division would get all of the German civilians in Gotha, G-o-t-h-a, to force them, quote, "They would go through and see what we saw." And I remember so clearly, as I was near the bodies and the Germans would walk around the perimeter, and their faces, their faces! They were struck with anguish the same as we had been, realizing the the Germans could be actors. But I believe that the vast majority of these people had no idea that this was going on. [Official records indicate that the camp was liberated on April 4th, 1945, and that Generals Bradley, Eisenhower and Patton visited the camp on April 10th.

According to Richard P. Matthews in his 2004 book, *Good Soldiers: The History of the 353rd Infantry Regiment, 89th Infantry Division*, the 353rd was very near Ohrdruf on April 10th, in an assembly camp awaiting their next move. Writes Matthews, *"there has long been some confusion as to which unit, exactly, was responsible for making the discovery."* Various sources credit elements of the 353rd Regiment, 354th Regiment and 355th Regiments, along with elements of the 4th Armored Division with being the first units to arrive at the camp. After considerable research, Matthews credits the discovery to elements of the 602nd Tank Destroyer Battalion, 4th Armored Division, and Company B, 89th Recon Troop, 89th Infantry Division. He believes that elements of the 355th Regiment were also very soon on the scene.[1]] [When reviewing the edited transcript, Steele wrote the following comment. "There is absolutely no doubt in my mind as to who set foot first inside the "gate" at Ohrdruf; it was the group in the two recon vehicles. And there is no doubt in my mind as to who stepped through the gate second – 2nd Platoon, Company I, 3rd Battalion, 353rd Regiment, of the 89th Infantry Division." Steele also stated that he regrets not responding to a letter that Richard P. Matthews, the author of *Good Soldiers*, had written asking unit members for input for his book. Writes Steele, "during our 89th Division Society of WW II reunions, we were asked to send any and all stories and photos of our own, including stories of Ohrdruf. At the time, any and all details as to who was first or last was immaterial. Now that I have 'sworn the truth' [in this interview] and detailed that auspicious occasion, my stories don't jibe [with Matthew's account]. So, if history were to repeat, I'd send a detailed reenactment." He concludes by stating, "by the time the multitudes arrived – before the citizens of Gotha – my memory becomes fuzzy as to the sequence of events and other details."]

I think that Hitler's scheme of bringing into being the German people of not trusting one another because of the infiltration of his police force, the undercover agents, that they didn't know. I really believe that in my heart. That night we found out that the mayor of Gotha committed suicide.

DePue: You'd been fighting for several months through France. Eastern France. Western Germany. Had you ever gotten any information that you might be stumbling across these kinds of things?

Steele: No, because it was not known. This was the very first concentration camp that was discovered.

DePue: So nobody had ever told you or talked about this before? That the Germans possibly were doing this?

Steele: No. We'd known, of course, from information that certain prisoners –the Jewish people and the Russians and other nationalities, probably Americans—we'd known that they were in camps. But we had no idea beyond that point.

[1] Richard P. Matthews, *Good Soldiers: The History of the 353rd Infantry Regiment, 89th Infantry Division, 1942-1945* (USA: 353rd Regimental History Project, 2004) pp. 363-370.

DePue: Okay, Harold, maybe this is not a fair question to ask, but I want you to try to paint a picture. You've already done a pretty graphic job. But as clearly as you can that first moment that you arrived in the camp and saw this: your emotions, the sights and the smells. What was that like?

Steele: Well, I would answer you this way. I had never seen a dead person other than in a casket, until I served in World War II. The first really dead person that I knew was my medic that I visited with you about before. And I rushed to him as safely as possible, realizing I couldn't help him. But I saw his innards coming out his back. And I saw the color changing so rapidly to grayish. I've seen many dead animals on a farm. But not this massive group of people that were gunned down. I was in shock to think that this happened only at a short distance from us. Why couldn't we have been there before to save them?

But that could never have been, because the Germans wanted to eradicate all evidence. So my feeling was more in shock, more than realizing the sight that I saw or the odor that may have existed. But I do not recall any odor. Because I think that the bodies, being so void of nutrients, it was more like skeletons and bones and dry skin practically.

But then you would see these eyes and emaciated faces. And I just can only say it was more of a shock than anything. But I would also say that when General Eisenhower and— [telephone ringing]

DePue: Brief disruption from modern technology there.

Steele: General Eisenhower and General Patton came. The record's quite clear that General Patton vomited; he lost his stomach. General Eisenhower was so distraught, because he was of German extraction, and couldn't believe that a nation could do such a thing. I know that some of our guys really got sick to their stomach. I didn't. I suspect the reason is I came from the farm.

DePue: Could you understand? Could you rationalize what you were looking at?

Steele: I could from this extent. In high school we studied world history, and the nation that was a shock to me was the Soviets that eliminated, murdered—**murdered—millions** of their own people. They starved them to death, particularly the kolkhoz, the farmers in the Soviet Union, because they wouldn't voluntarily join the Communists. They couldn't force them to do it and they just starved them to death. So only from that aspect could I imagine, having grown up in our country, in our nation, where individuals were so important to our system, that they'd be discriminately starved to death and worked to death as these people had been.

DePue: But it's still got to be—it's one thing to read about evil in a textbook—and now you ran across it face to face, and very unexpectedly, sounds like.

Steele: An absolute shock.

DePue: Did that change your perspective? Now I know that you had no doubts in your mind before this that you were fighting in a cause that was right and that was just and that needed to be fought. But did that even deepen your feelings afterwards?

Steele: As I mentioned earlier, we were never taught to hate. We were taught to win. We were taught to win through tactics, weaponry. I couldn't hate in the sense that what I saw there was the result of, because in all likelihood, the Germans that were there were ordered to be there. But the guy that pulled the trigger certainly was not ordered to do that. He did that selfishly to protect his own hide so no one could live and say, "He treated us this way." So it's a difficult question to answer because your mental attitude is still to win a war, to keep your guard up, to be keen of mind at every moment. And if you meet an unforeseen predicament, find a way to wash it off and go along. And I think that's probably the approach that I took.

DePue: Well, you were in combat enough to know that, in the heat of combat, things happen that people are not necessarily proud about afterwards. But this is an incident that didn't happen in the heat of combat.

Steele: No. No. No, it was out and out murder. But again, my only correlation to this in mind was what I'd read, learned about the Soviet Union.

DePue: Had you seen anything else that you wanted to talk about in the heat of combat?

Steele: Yes I do. Within a few days, maybe a week, maybe two weeks, after we left Ohrdruf, we were in a line of skirmishes. Meaning, in the infantry you have your point man, you spread out; you don't stay in a cluster, you spread out. You spread out so if you do meet an unforeseen enemy that are armed and open fire, at least some of you have opportunity of surviving and returning the fire. So that was our position that particular day. Over to my right flank there were trees. Ahead of us there were limited trees. To the left of us limited trees. But about three o'clock on my right: rifle fire. One of my members of my platoon, he's probably thirty yards from me—I happened to know him as a father of five children, young children—he fell and he was dead. I saw out of the corner of my eye as I looked at him, a vanishing German. Time I got ready to return fire, I heard the engine and they were gone. And quite likely that small group of Germans stayed back to probably fall some trees over one of the roadways as a deterrent to our progress.

DePue: A delaying action.

Steele: Absolutely. But that one and other similar examples, I've said, "God, why wasn't it me?" I was single. I wasn't a father of five. Other times. "Why wasn't it me?" Fellows that were fathers. And that comes to your mind many times when you're in combat, when somebody else is gone and you're not.

DePue: Did it give you a sense of guilt?

Steele: No, not guilt, because I wasn't guiding that bullet. But I wondered why it wasn't directed toward me. The enemy, of course, wouldn't know one from another. But that happens many times I think.

DePue: Did you sense that the Germans were—now you just described an incident where they're obviously still resisting and fighting hard –but did you sense that the resistance was slackening by this time? This is late April. Early April is when you got to Ohrdruf.

Steele: I did not wonder why we could move rather unmolested over the flat ground. But when we reach irregular ground in a forest area or a town, you knew that's where you're going to run into real trouble. And you did.

DePue: Were there pockets of Germans, groups of Germans that—

Steele: As they would be in a retreat position, then they would go back to an area that would be tactically to their advantage. And that's where they would dig in and assemble their troops.

DePue: Were there some that were ready, eager to surrender to you?

Steele: Not at that stage, no.

DePue: Okay. And again we're talking mid April. Just a couple weeks before the end of the war.

Steele: They weren't too eager, no. No, they were still fighting to win. Because Hitler said, "To the end. To the end."

DePue: Did you understand that level of devotion to a lost cause?

Steele: In warfare when the bullets are flying whether you're in a defense or an offense, you don't think about that. You think more about what must I do to achieve our objective. And the details of, is it going to be over tomorrow or the next day, you don't think about that. You think about just today. Just today. Just this hour, this moment.

DePue: Were you ever injured?

Steele: Yes.

DePue: Can you explain that incident to us?

Steele: In one of these unforeseen hotboxes, if I might use that word, either 88s, direct fire, or perhaps it was either a mortar coming in an explosion near me, and I felt my arm. I got some, what I call, needle shrapnel. It didn't tear my arm apart but the needle shrapnel penetrated. As soon as it was possible I got to an aid station. They

removed it, did the necessary bandaging, and I was lucky not to have any greater wounds.

DePue: This is your right arm?

Steele: I think I might have mentioned to you at another time when mortars came in. I know that one was a mortar. Didn't hear it. And **bam**, and I felt, my God they got me in the neck. And I felt up here, no blood. That shrapnel came so close I felt it, but it didn't hit me. So you don't know.

DePue: Might have been an inch away from a very serious wound in that respect. The injury that you did get, was that after Ohrdruf?

Steele: Yes.

DePue: Was that the last drive to link up with the Soviets?

Steele: Well, one of the last. No, it wasn't the last one, no. We had further distance to go.

DePue: Okay. Well, I got a couple maps here in front of you. I'm a map kind of guy. So Harold, I'll just show you here the last one. It might be hard to see, but I was highlighting on this particular map, which is from the *West Point Atlas of Military History*, it does show the VIII Corps and I believe, even at that time, the 89th Division was in the VIII Corps, and it's heading all the way up here to Chemnitz. Is that in the general area at the end of your movement forward where you started to encounter some of the Soviets?

Steele: It is. And here's Dresden and down here is Czechoslovakia. And I'm also looking… There's Erfurt. We went through right near Erfurt. And I'm looking for another name I do not see in this map. It should be—

DePue: Zwickau?

Steele: Zwickau. Where's Zwickau?

DePue: I don't think it shows up in this map because I was looking for it as well. It's a little bit farther west of Chemnitz here, somewhere along in here.

Steele: I do have a story in that area.

DePue: Okay. And that's supposedly close to the Moldau River as well.

Steele: I can't answer that. Just as this line shows, General Patton was given an order by General Eisenhower to take the 3rd Division and swing to the southeast into Austria, down into lower Austria. General Patton then made a decision to leave the 89th Division, which was the left flank of the 3rd Army, to become the new right flank of the 1st Army.

DePue: Hodge's Army.

Steele: General Hodge's Army, that's correct. So we, the 89th, became the new right flank. And we were further given an order when General Patton swung down there, either at the same time or shortly thereafter, that we would not move further east; that we would change our tactics and become a holding force. So this changed the whole procedure from our experience. Up until that time we were an aggressor. So if I might address myself to that. I was assigned—my platoon was assigned –to the main road going from our line of advancement to the road going into Zwickau. I assigned my platoon the task of setting up a defense to the adjacent American forces on the left and right flank of I Company on the right; I'm not sure who was on our left, but quite likely it was also I Company But my main penetration was the roadway.

So we set up a defense of antipersonnel mines along the grassway as far as our line went, left and right, and we put antipersonnel mines and antitank mines in the roadway. Of course this work was done by the unit of our company –or the battalion as the case may be, but I think all of our company –who were adept to this, trained specifically for this. Furthermore, we contacted the German civilians in that area and explained to them that we were setting up a defense, that there were trip mines, there were antitank mines and they should not, at all, go out in this area, because they could be hurt.

A number of days later—God was there that day—we heard an unusual muffled series of sounds up at Zwickau. I put everyone in a ready position: machine gunners, riflemen, get ready to go, something's happening. And minutes and minutes and minutes, you'd hear it get louder and louder. And finally we could see a whole group of people—I say a mess of people—unorganized people coming down the roadway. As they got closer and closer I could see that they were prisoners. They'd been released. As they got closer I thought, **My gosh**, we've got all those antipersonnel mines positioned. Everything is in a defensive position. **Stay back, stay back**. Well, when they saw us they came on the run. And I thought, Gosh, this is going to be mass murder. God was there. Not a single mine was detonated. They all came through the mine fields. They were hungry. They were starved. They were so excited. But we had orders: if prisoners ever come never, ever give them very much food, because that could kill them. And we all knew that. So we ushered them back out of this area. But they were uncontrollable. They were free. We were Americans. Some were Americans, but not many. All nationalities. They'd been released because the Germans probably by then knew the Russians were coming in from the other way, and they sure weren't going to go that way. So they directed them to our lines.

DePue: So these were all military personnel.

Steele: All nationalities. Some were military, but I can't remember uniforms. I remember more non-descript clothing.

DePue: Were they also very emaciated?

Steele: Not like I'd seen at Ohrdruf. Hungry, starved, but not emaciated.

DePue: There's one more question that I wanted to ask you about Ohrdruf. I know that you had mentioned previously what Eisenhower's decision was. He'd brought all the civilians in there. But what else did he insist happen about Ohrdruf after that?

Steele: I didn't know it at the time, but General Eisenhower gave an order to have as many voices as possible recorded, or in writing, of what they saw and what happened that day, because he predicted that one day in the future people would say, "That never happened; that just didn't happen." I want to tell you, it happened to me at this position at Ohrdruf—excuse me, at Zwickau on that road. But that comes after the story I've just told. So if it's all right I'll proceed.

As soon as these prisoners were taken back, I got my men busy and brought in the seasoned troops on deploying the defense positions, and they had kept maps, so they knew exactly where everything was. And by the way, prior to that day, one of the ladies nearby went out to collect dandelion greens to cook and she hit a trip mine; it took her leg. She had known, but I guess she forgot. It didn't kill her but she lost a leg.

So we cleared the area, took all the defense positions out, and then the Germans start coming through there soon. The SS [Secret Service], whole units, and when the Germans came in through our lines they never wore their helmets; they put on their dress caps. And our order was, when an SS group comes, to take the weaponry from every one of them except the commanding officer. You leave him with a rifle with one round of ammunition. To an SS officer, to take his sidearms and give him a rifle was an insult, and they let us know it. They'd come in my little office, a house along the road, stiff arm, **"Heil Hitler! Heil Hitler!"** Got his weapon. Had a young lady in the little town as my interpreter. I had the Stars and Stripes. I said, through her, "You're so proud of Hitler, look what your leader has done to these people." And there'd be pictures of Ohrdruf. And by then there were other concentration camps. "Look what your chief has done." "That is not Hitler. He would not do a thing like that." But when the Hitler Youth came, they were far more emotional than even the SS. The Hitler Youth were just a basket case, emotionally, so fervent that Hitler was God, don't speak a thing against my leader. They were treated from birth, I think, to hate everyone else, a horrible, horrible situation that Germany had to put up with after the war was the Hitler Youth. They were miserable.

DePue: Growing up in the middle of the United States in tough times in the Depression but also in a democratic society, was that difficult for you to comprehend, that level of brainwashing if you will?

Steele: First time I'd seen it, Mark, and I couldn't—I had to believe it because there it was happening right in front of me. I'd read about what Hitler was doing to try to create

a new super-nation by using the animal process of crossbreeding a muscular man and a curvaceous woman or whatever to create this new breed, and I thought, Well, jeez, what's he going to get? Well, I saw right there what he's going to get: man trying to control man; this is horrible, horrible, horrible.

DePue: I know somewhere shortly thereafter, I would assume, your unit actually linked up with the Soviets.

Steele: Yes we did. We did, after a certain period of time, soon after the Germans came through our lines that were able to come through before the Soviets came. Remember now this whole thing –meaning the lines for us to be a holding force until the Russians got there—was the result of the Three Powers, of Roosevelt, of—

DePue: Churchill.

Steele: Churchill and—

DePue: Stalin.

Steele: –Stalin deciding certain things in two different conferences. And by the way, who was Roosevelt's chief advisor on Communist affairs? Alger Hiss, a card-carrying Communist, who was a double agent. He was advising our president what to do. So I'm confident that one of the many mistakes we made in not proceeding to the east—and I believe fervently we wouldn't have lost any more people had we continued our forward advance as quickly as we had under General Patton—as being a holding force.

Now, we met face-to-face on this particular day. It was a quiet sunny day. Here came the Russians. They were ragtag, but I don't say that making fun of them. We knew they were poor. We knew they had fought hard. We knew they'd lost thousands if not millions of people. I wasn't surprised. But what I **was surprised** at, through an interpreter, this one particular Russian –he and I were as close together as you and I are now –he said, "You Americans are our friends. we finally get together. Oh, this is a wonderful day! Look what we have done for you! As you can see, we kept very little of our production! We don't have any uniforms! But all of your equipment, those nice rifles you have, all those things, we produced for you, and we just kept a few, and those trucks and tanks, all that came from us! Oh, you're our best friends!"

And I thought, Jeez, I know exactly what General Marshall told us. The Lend-Lease program. And I knew that was true. I just knew it was true. How can a leader so completely succeed in causing the population of a country as large as Russia to believe all this propaganda? But he was successful, because they had no other source of information. That young man believed exactly what he told me. Because that's what he knew he was told. I thought, Jeez, propaganda.

DePue: Well, you just told the story about the SS and the Hitler Youth. And you told the story about these Soviet soldiers. Both of them are brainwashed. So it's got to be

something that you're connecting there as well, that there's really not that much difference between these two. One's our ally and one's our enemy, but otherwise what's the difference between the two?

Steele: The result's the same. And later on I can tell you the story that occurred in Prague, Czechoslovakia when the media is the story, and the successive events that occurred after Czechoslovakia fell.

DePue: Well, shall we go there now?

Steele: Well, we can take a trip. But let's first go after the war ended. War's over. 89th Division goes back to France and we process troops going to the zone of interior or to the Far East. I happened to be in charge of a mess area feeding the troops that are going.

DePue: Do you recall where in France you were stationed?

Steele: We called it Camp Twenty Grand. It was near the coast of France about eighty miles from Paris toward Dover, England, south of Dover. I should remember the town, but right now I don't. One of the things I did have to do on that occasion was to go to Paris with a six-by-six truck, get a large generator so we could generate electricity for the troops for the whole camp.

I was there until October of that year processing troops. And the 89th Division then had completed its mission and was coming back to the States. For those of us that didn't have enough points to come back with the 89th, we were redeployed, and I ended up with the 83rd Division in Steyr, Austria. I believe it was I Company; I'm pretty sure I went to the same company. Another soldier, another lieutenant –he and I were classmates at the University of Illinois and fraternity brothers –we ended up in the same company in Austria.

DePue: Do you recall the regiment you were assigned to in the 83rd?

Steele: No I don't.

DePue: Okay, go ahead.

Steele: But that's in the record someplace. We were then, of course, occupational forces with very little duty. I'd been there just a fairly short time when the regimental commander sent me orders to report to his office in Linz. Upon reporting to him, he said, "The American Red Cross has requested that we find the whereabouts of PFC Clyde Guthrie, who came up missing in April 1945" and now we're in October, November area. "I want you to take my jeep, a trailer load of gasoline, my driver and a GI interpreter and go up north and find out what happened, near Kassel, Germany. At the current time this whole area is occupied by the British. But keep me informed every day by TWX," which was the Army's method of communication. I had the last word. "Yes sir." (chuckles) So I proceeded up the autobahn and up to Kassel, and sure enough, stayed with the British, the Brits.

I found out what afternoon tea was and some of the other things I'd read about the Brits that I had no experience with before. But also following the orders I'd learned in the US Army, you carry out your orders. So we put in long days, didn't mess around, proceeded to the area that was the last record of PFC Clyde Guthrie, the morning report.

And here was a little town. Don't remember the name. I said, Well, he came up missing here. Maybe he's wounded. Maybe they took him to hospital. Because if you'd taken him to the aid station or a US hospital, they'd know the records. So here was a German hospital. There you don't just walk in; you knock on the door. I had my two men with me. The door opened and here came a Catholic lady in full habit. And I said, "Guten abend," and then I said to my good man, "Tell her who we are." Which I found out then, for the first time, he really wasn't very accustomed to this foreign language, German. (both chuckle) So after a few minutes she smiled and said, "Would it help if we talked in English?" I said, "Yes, ma'am, it would." (both laugh) I could have hugged her but I decided that wouldn't be very proper.

So she said, "Now what is it you'd like?" And I explained to her the mission I was on to find the whereabouts of this person at a certain date. She said, "I believe I can help you. Please join me." We went in the hospital. She went to her office, and she showed me his personal effects, including his dog tags. She opened the ledger and said, "This is the day he was brought here by American troops. He was badly injured." I presume wounded from gunshot or artillery or something. "We tried everything we could but we couldn't save him. His body, his remains, are in the garden and they're marked." She said, "Come with me." We went out to the garden and there was a wooden cross with his name on it. So I wrote down all the information, got information on her, location, everything, took the personal effects, rushed back to regimental headquarters, and the colonel looked at me and said, "You're back already?" and I could have fallen dead. I thought, damn, I could have let these GIs at least go in a PX in Frankfurt and at least had ten minutes to themselves where they'd get a little enjoyment. But I didn't. Rushed on back. Typed up the report and sent it to him. A few days later I became reassigned; I'm now Assistant Inspector General 83rd Division. So I went from a rifleman to Assistant Inspector General. I was there until the division went home, which was I think, still in November. Now I'm reassigned again. I'm Assistant Provost Marshal, US Forces in Austria. I moved into Vienna.

DePue: Before we get to that, I want your reaction to two specific events. One was V-E Day. I assume you're still with the 89th somewhere close to Zwickau at that time.

Steele: Yeah, right.

DePue: What happened on V-E Day from your perspective? That was May 8, I believe.

Steele: Yes.

DePue: At least the American V-E Day. The Russians thought they had a different one.

Steele: We were elated, but yet we weren't surprised, because the Russians had come to us. Our sector was no longer infested with the enemy, the Germans. But elated that the war was over. We're done fighting. We're finished. Then we would think, Now we'll go to Japan; now we'll go to Asia; now we'll go to the Pacific and get into another war. That's the first thing that I thought of. But then I got other good news. Steele, you get to go down to the Riviera. You get seven days of R&R. And my goodness we jumped into trucks and went down to the Riviera.

DePue: The French Riviera.

Steele: French Riviera. Never heard of it, but there it was right in front of our naked eyes. I'd never seen girls wear that scanty stuff before. (DePue laughing) Several of us broke our arms. (both laughing) We'd stumble over these things. It was terrible. And I thought, American girls will certainly never, ever dress like that. Well, I was wrong. But what a change from being in a foxhole, being careful, being cautious, and all the tremors of war, and now you're here in luxury with the finest of food, and jeez, not a worry in the world.

DePue: The other incident I wanted to talk to you about, that I'm sure you recall, is hearing the news of the atomic bomb in August and shortly thereafter, obviously, the end of the war in the Pacific as well. But what was your reaction hearing the news about the atomic bomb?

Steele: Yes it was there in France, there at the tent camps, when that news came. I thought, What is an atomic bomb? There were pictures of the plume and the Stars and Stripes. I thought, Jeez, jeez, boy. And I thanked the President, because we knew he had to give the okay. Thank you, President Truman, thank you. We're not going to have to go there and fight another one. Because I'd heard lots of stories about the trauma of jungle warfare and I thought I'd been lucky to go to Europe.

DePue: No doubt in your mind that he had made the right decision?

Steele: Oh, no doubt. No doubt at all.

DePue: Had any cause to rethink that in the years afterwards?

Steele: I've thought of it several times, and I come even more proud of a president that had the courage, the conviction. But also, he'd been a battery commander in the artillery in World War I. He knew what combat was. He knew what war was. And that helped him make that decision without probably thinking too long. Get this sucker over. Because he knew the Japanese quite likely would have been just like Hitler. We're fighting to the last blood, the last person! And all indications were the Japanese were of the same mind. The kamikaze {in Japanese, "Divine Wind": pilots taught to fly their planes directly into targets, especially U. S. Navy ships}pilots and all the other factors brought into being that were not even considered that a person was very important. So the Japanese citizen quite likely wasn't any more important than the kamikaze pilot to the last person. So I thought, Jeez, thank you, thank you, Mr. President.

DePue: Okay. We're going to take just a quick pause here and let me go ahead and get us started here again.

(short break)

DePue: Okay, Harold, we had to take just a quick break to do some planning if you will. When we left, you just had arrived in Austria. This would have been what time frame?

Steele: This is when I became Assistant Provost Marshal. This would have been the very end of '45 or the very beginning of '46. And I suspect beginning of '46.

DePue: What was it like in Vienna, Austria at that time?

Steele: The city was cold; there was no heat. The city was dark because there was very little electricity. The city was barren. There were no restaurants open. No teahouses open. The hotels that were open had limited facilities. The theater was open and you could go to the opera. You wore your overcoat and you carried your sack lunch. But the opera went on. The Viennese carried out the tradition even under the greatest circumstance of adversity because they loved music; they loved the opera. I had never been to an opera, but I met somebody called Margery, and she said, "We're going to the opera tomorrow night." I says, "Okay, we'll do that." Other than that, down along the Donau Canal—the Donau Canal linked parts of the Danube River together—there was much bomb damage. Along the Danube River there was much bomb damage. And over in the Prater where the big Ferris wheel was, the big amusement park, it was devastated to a great extent, because that's where the SS and the Russians fought. That part of Vienna was quite badly mangled. The framework of the great Ferris wheel, one of the largest in the world, was still there. Each car could hold like forty people and there were thirty-six cars as I recall. They were all burned off.

We were housed up in the Fifteenth Bezirk, which was a residential part of the city, the very nicest residential part. Bezirk means district. That's where we had our CID offices. But I'm jumping now from being Assistant Provost Marshal to CID. We had very nice quarters, these homes. Our main office later became down in the first Bezirk in the center of the city.

So that's what Vienna was like. Four powers. The American, the British, the French and the Russian. The city was in four parcels, except the center, and that was international zone. It would change every thirty days. The American, the French, the British and the Russians would be in control a month at a time. The country likewise was in four zones, much the same as Germany.

DePue: I wanted to get your impression. You talked very vividly about your impressions of the SS and the Hitler Youth and about the Russian soldiers. But you were in France for a while. So I want your impression of the German civilians that you encountered, the French civilians you encountered, and now the Austrians that you encountered.

Steele: Okay. The German civilians: we saw them only during the time of warfare. The only time you got the opportunity to visit with them was when you were in a reserve position. I remember going once and knocking on a door of a German home in a little village. It was the outskirts. This house was by itself. A lady came and I said, "Bitte heiss, heiss Wasser, bitte," hot water. She said, "You mean some hot water?" (both chuckle) I said, "Yes, ma'am." She said, "I have a daughter that lives in Chicago." No, no. "I have lived in America." She said, "Where are you from?" I said, "Near Chicago." "Oh, gangster country." I said, "Well, it used to be years and years ago." (both laugh) But that was the very first thing that Germans would often say –gangster country –because Al Capone had quite a reputation. Didn't stop just in Chicago borders or Illinois or the Midwest, it was worldwide, that rascal.

So that was my first impression. The other thing, I found out during combat, that they make good candy, because we took over a candy factory one day, and gosh blast it, there it laid. And I thought, I know we're not supposed to do it because it could be dangerous, but that looked pretty safe to me. So I had a piece of chocolate. You couldn't judge the German people, because they had been through horrible things in the cities with the B-17s bombing. In the country they tried to carry out their production of food, but they were much hampered. And you knew that many of the Germans didn't believe what was going on anyway. You just knew that. They'd been taken over. So I didn't hate them, but I certainly would watch them very carefully.

The French people. I'm reminded of a story. This elderly person in the past few years flew in by airplane to Paris. There was a man on duty there in uniform saying, "Where's your passport?" And the man says, "Well, I'll get it out of here." He's getting it out of his valise. He said, "You know you're supposed to have your passport here right away. Haven't you ever been in France before?" The man said, "Yes sir, I was once. And I came in on D-day and I didn't see a single Frenchman asking for my passport. As a matter of fact, there weren't any Frenchmen there on D-day."

Well, I would say that, with the exception of Paris, the French people are very kind, very thoughtful, particularly the French people in the area of the original assault. They will not let succeeding generations ever forget what the Allied Forces did for them. Paris –different. Other parts of France might be. But I would say I never saw a Frenchman I didn't like, I saw some I questioned their judgment. But I love French food in a really nice restaurant, but unfortunately it didn't happen that time.

The Austrians. The Austrians are far more genteel than the Germans. The Germans are rather aggressive. The Germans are a little abrupt. The Germans do not have the warm sense of hospitality that the Austrians have. The Austrians for a great part became forced because of the Anschluss of '39. They were put into a very awkward position. But yet there were that percentage that voluntarily became Nazis and voluntarily became sympathizers to the Nazi movement. After all, Hitler was

Austrian born. I saw his autograph he executed when he was an interior decorator in Austria.

DePue: You saw examples of some of his work?

Steele: Oh yes I did. A. Schicklegruber, in the first floor wall of the villa at 141 Kahlenbergerstrasse, the residence of General and Mrs. William Yarborough. The Yarboroughs kindly invited the attendees of our wedding reception to their home after the ceremony on 13 October 1946. A. Schicklebruber was an interior designer. Margaret and I saw Adolf's signature there. I'd been to that home before and saw the signature.

DePue: Tell us how you went from being an Assistant Provost Marshal to 12th CID, Criminal Investigation Division.

Steele: Yes. Again, that was by orders from high command. You're assigned. You don't know why. That's just the way the ball bounces. I believe the fact that fast redeployment of people after the war ended required many openings to be filled, resulting in unforeseen promotions and re-assignments.

DePue: Didn't you want to go back home?

Steele: You bet I did. You bet. But I couldn't. I didn't have enough points. I don't say it negatively. That was just the regulations. I understand that because of our society. Family is important. Freedom is most significantly important. I became Chief Agent, 32nd CID. Within a very short time, a matter of a very few days or weeks, that division was written off, and I became Chief Agent of the 12th CID. We only needed one divisions in US Forces in Austria, So the 12th was the one that reigned supreme and I became CID agent.

DePue: What was your rank at that time?

Steele: I was a first lieutenant.

DePue: Did you eventually get promoted to captain?

Steele: Yes. I would say within six months I was promoted to captain.

DePue: When you were in the CID what were you doing?

Steele: As chief agent, you're responsible for the administration, you're responsible for agent responsibility, you're responsible to read and study each one of the—well, first of all, let me back off. I would want to answer your question saying what is the function of CID. That's to assist the provost marshal in maintaining law and order, in this case in Austria, a nation that had just finished several years of warfare. [The CID was responsible to investigate any crime committed by U.S. military or U.S. civilian personnel and any crime committed by any other national against U.S. personnel or material, and forward the investigation report to the office of the Judge

Advocate General for prosecution or evaluation.] Several years of total commitment to the German Nazi empire. Several years of being short of their people, that drained their young men and women in many instances. So they were down to a very difficult life. Crime often follows warfare. So our responsibility was to investigate any and all instances of criminal activity by US Forces or any personnel of US government or any criminal activity committed by other nationalities against US Forces or materiel. We were to investigate. And those investigations then would be written up. All the evidence would be included if there was evidence was the case. It would go all the way from black market to murder, and everything in between. Drug busts. I'd never heard of drugs before. That was brand new. That was coming from the southeast of Austria. Our agency was comprised of former criminologists, lawyers, sheriffs, deputies—across our nation who had previously served in law enforcement.

DePue: You forgot one of the sources of agents: farmers.

Steele: Well, I was one of two farmers. And that other farmer left the farm many years before I did. (both chuckle) He was twenty-nine years older than I. We were both civilian and military. Quite a number of these agents had also served in the CID down in Italy. When General Clark then was given command of US Forces in Austria, his forces came with him.

DePue: You mentioned General Yarborough. Wasn't it Colonel Yarborough at that time?

Steele: Yes, he was a full colonel at that time.

DePue: I think you have some stories to tell about him.

Steele: Yes indeed. I'll give these in sequence. Number one. I always looked upon him—and I've told him this when he was alive—I said, "General Yarborough, if there's a god of war, bless him. He put me under your command." He was a graduate of West Point. His first tour of duty was with the forces of Philippine Scouts. That was his first tour of duty for three years. I think he graduated West Point in '36, so it would have been '39 when he came back to the States.

DePue: Do you remember his first name?

Steele: William Phelam Yarborough, P-h-e-l-a-m. He read a book there. I'm sure he read a lot of them. But one of those books was entitled *Nijinsky* by Romola Nijunski, his wife.. Why he would read about Vaslav Nijinsky I don't know, but that plays a role ten years later in Vienna.

Colonel Yarborough and his wife Norma and their son Lee and their one daughter at that time, Norma, lived in a villa up in the Vienna Woods overlooking the city. He carried out his responsibility in an original and very innovative manner. I found out later he designed all the jumpsuits, the boots, the uniform, and was the first leader under General Clark of the first long-range paratroop drop from England to North Africa. He was the operations officer. And Bill told me later, "We

scattered troops all over, because all we had to go by was the sextant and a compass, and that was a windy, windy night. Those two instruments didn't do the trick, but we did obviously maintain and gain our objective." I just give you that background because he was one of the leaders in paratroops, and he was one of the paratroopers also landing in several operations, both in North Africa and in Sicily and Italy and southern France. A sound mind, a brilliant mind, an innovative mind, and dedicated to the troops. And dedicated to General Clark.

DePue: Can we fast forward a little? Because I know that he played some other important roles.

Steele: Okay. Let me first say that I didn't know about that book he had read at the time that he called me into his office. At this time we had changed our office from CID the sixteenth Bezirk to the first Bezirk in the summer palace of the royal family, which was headquarters of the Provost Marshal, Colonel Yarborough. We had what we called a bitch box [an intercom] on our desk. That summer palace was a pretty good size. H said, "Steele." "Yes, Colonel." "Come into my office."

I went in. This was late winter, early spring 1946. Back in his office—it was not a square, it was sort of odd shaped—but very nice. It was a dark day outside. The snow was dirty, a dismal day, late in the afternoon, and there were two figures back behind his desk and he introduced me. "This is Mr. and Mrs. Vaslav Nijinsky." I thought, "Okay, Nijinsky." I didn't know him from a sack of Irish potatoes. And he said, "They are defecting from the Soviet Union and I've made arrangements for them to have proper Austrian citizenship credentials and a hotel room at this particular hotel – I think it was the Palace Hotel as I best remember – in Salzburg. I want you to take my staff car, my driver, and safely take them to Salzburg." We had 105 miles through the Soviet zone from Vienna to Linz in the U. S. zone. There's one road, a native old-time crooked cobblestone surface. We had a three-mile air corridor and a railroad. That's it.

"Take my driver, my staff car, and plan to leave in –I think he said –an hour." And by now it's getting to be late afternoon at that time of year, with darkness upon us soon.. I quite likely had a small valise in the car; the Nijinskys had suitcases. The driver, a corporal, put his gear in the trunkj.. Mrs. Nijinsky sat behind me. She had on a black fur hat, a figured woolen coat with a black fur collar. Figured meaning the coat wasn't a solid color; it had some colored designs.

Mr. Nijinsky sat back of the driver and he had on a real dark felt hat and a heavy overcoat. She would keep her hand on his hand or on his leg to console him. That was my impression. She was in charge. As we left headquarters, we advanced through the city of Vienna past Schonbrunn up to the point of debarkation, which was the roadway leading to Linz, which was in

the American zone on the Salzach River. As I mentioned, about 105 miles.

As we neared the American gate first, there were American military police. And they said, "See your credentials." I was in civilian clothes and carried a U. S. passport. "Blackie", the colonel's driver, gave him his regular GI pass. I showed him my US passport. And no credentials, no anything. My armament was a 32 caliber semi-automatic pistol in a shoulder holster. Mrs. Nijinsky consoled Mr. Nijinsky and seemed quite calm. I forgot to tell you this. Colonel Yarborough said, "Now I have these credentials for the Nijinskys. These credentials are Austrian. These are Austrian citizens. These are Austrian citizens and this proves it." "Yes sir, I understand."

So when the American MPs finish with us in the front seat, he thumbs us through. We now go a few blocks, maybe two. Here's a Russian roadblock. And each of Russian soldier has a tommy guns over his shoulders crossways, gun in front, strap on the back. Of course they're always curt, which I was used to by then. They didn't speak English. I handed them my passports, Blackie his. Rolled down the back window. Now he's putting flashlights in our faces. It's getting dark enough. Put a flashlight, compare the picture on all identification. Blackie didn't need a picture. He had his GI pass. Did with me. Got in the back seat and flashlight in Vaslav Nijinsky's face, looked at the picture, then Mrs. Nijinsky, looked at the picture, and waved us on. We could now start breathing again.

And then we hit the 105 mile corridor. Many people asked, "How many times did you stop?" I said, "I don't remember, but I would just guess 100 percent that we didn't stop." I'd been up and down that road enough to know that if you stopped there could be a Russian right there who would enjoy taking you in. So we didn't stop; we kept going. And that was not a fast journey. That's not an autobahn. That's down a crooked road, a rough road, and there'd be 6 X 6 trucks, all the US Army trucks supplying our troops in Vienna, so the incoming traffic had some activity. We couldn't have averaged forty miles an hour. So it was probably two and a half to three hours to get to Linz. Probably three. And then through the same security routine. Through the Russian blockade; same things happened. Crossed the bridge to the American sector; went through the same procedures, then headed down to Salzburg. I'm sure we stopped someplace for necessities about that time—no doubt some US outpost. Just as we were getting into Salzburg I said to Blackie, "Slow this thing down, because when we want to make a safe trip. You heard your commanding officer." I'm in civilian clothes. He doesn't think I'm any more than a clod of dirt, because I'm a civilian. He takes his orders from his commander who's a colonel.

I said, "Blackie, it would be nice if we made this really a nice trip so we could let the colonel know that we were good, huh?" "Ah blah blah blah." So we get caught for speeding as we get into Salzburg. I said, "Thanks a lot, Blackie, this is really nice." (DePue laughs) So I get up, show my badge to the MPs. I said, "I'm on a special mission for Colonel Yarborough." He said, "That's fine. Slow the damn thing down, would you?" I said, "Yes, I'm sure you're right; we'll slow it down."

So we get to the hotel and dispatch the Nijinskys, and we stay with our CID unit in Salzburg.

DePue: Probably the Nijinskys were the most grateful and relieved people in town that day.

Steele: Oh indeed, because now they know they're free. They know they're free. Because the book—it's very clearly in her book that she wrote—*"We made it to Vienna. We got to Vienna. And we're in the Sacher Hotel. I'm upstairs in the Sacher Hotel—I think it was the third floor—and the phone rings. My blood turns to ice water. Who can know we're here? But I knew I had to answer and so I did. And the man at the desk said, 'Mrs. Nijinsky, there's an American colonel down here and he's here to help you.' And I said to myself, 'Help me? He's just going to turn me over to the Russians.' But I said, 'I'll be right down.' So I took the steps down and as I looked down below me in the arcade there was a handsome distinguished American colonel. And in a few minutes Colonel Yarborough convinced me without a doubt indeed, he was here to help me. And he explained that he would see to it that we safely got to the American zone."*

DePue: That is an amazing story. Are we ready now for a description about how you met Margery?

Steele: Oh yes. The CID was in the sixteenth Bezirk and we had two houses on Blaasstrasse, at the corner of Peter Jordan Strasse and Blaasstrasse. I'm going to say it was the southeast corner with a nice, huge, big beautiful home. Because it was going uphill it was quite higher—up in the air higher—than where I billeted, which was across the street. We also had the house next to it. That was our office, our interrogation center, and agents stayed there. Over where I stayed was our dining facilities and agents there. That's where our photographer was and so forth. What was the question?

DePue: About how you met Margery.

Steele: Through that period we had our vehicles there. Things were very active, with a lot of things going on. There were about 15 CID agents on duty. The work load was heavy. Two agents worked as a team. Often I'd serve with one of the agents, generally at night, because in the daytime I was busy in the office taking care of the duties of administration.

We had sort of a mascot. I call her a mascot. Her name was Betty Haggard. She was a civilian. She was from Gray Bull, Wyoming the county seat up in the mountains of northern Wyoming just below Montana. He wore cowboy boots in the evening. She worked in General—can't even remember his name now.

DePue: She sounds like an authentic character.

Steele: Oh she was, she was. She said, "Hal, are you going to the Colonel's ball?" Colonel Yarborough was going to have—in that summer palace—just a great big party for the Austrian civilians who were employed by CID and helping the American Forces

in this police activity. People that he could depend upon, people that earned a nice free evening. He was going to have Viennese music; he was going to have all kinds food. Food meant a lot to these Austrians. They make the most beautiful desserts and when they fix a dish of meat it's nicely done. It was just great. "Are you going?" I said, "No I'm not going." "Hal, you need to go. It's the Colonel's Ball. He expects you to be there." I said, "Now Betty, I don't have a girl." "Well, I know just the one you ought to go with?" "Who's that?" "She's my roommate." And I thought to myself, Uh-huh, trying to pawn your roommate off on your good friend. I've heard about these things. I said, Now after all I'm an investigator; I've got to think negative. (Depue laughs) And so about the third time she said, "Hal, you've got to go! You've got to show up there at the Colonel's ball. After all this is for the civilians. You just have to be there." I said, "You going?" She said, "No I'm not going. I don't rate that opportunity. But if I rated I'd sure be there." "All right, tell me about your roommate." She said, "Her name is Margery Whiteley and she works over in the general's headquarters and she is really a very fine person." I said, "What's she look like?" (Depue laughs) "Hal, I'm not going to tell you. You won't be disappointed." I said, "Betty, is she's really the kind of girl that you think I should go with?" "I certainly do." I said, "That was a dumb question on my part, because you wanted me to go. All right, I'll go."

Wouldn't you know, that night I'm put on special duty? I'm the chief agent. Quite likely something happened to one of the other agents and I was fill-in for his partner. By the time I should be there we were still over in the Russian sector. You didn't have a cell phone then to call and say, "I'm going to be late." That just wasn't possible. So I was late when I got there.

DePue: Got there to her?

Steele: To the hotel. Most of the American single girls stayed in a hotel down in the first Bezirk in the center of the city. That way they could easily walk to wherever their work took place. I'd never been to that hotel before. But in those days, didn't have a map. She told me where you turn, and so I went right to it. And went in. And the man behind the desk called her room. I just happen to be facing the steps, and in a few minutes I saw the right foot, the left foot come down. I saw those legs and I saw the hemline and kept coming down and "Well," I said, "she's nicely dressed." And then I saw this hairdo. The hair was up. Dark hair, brunette, nice figure, but I saw something in the hair when she came down. My Lord, there's a red and yellow bird in her hair, what have I got here? (both laugh) But she met me sort of sternly saying, "If you'd have been two more minutes late, I wouldn't have come." I said, "I am terribly, terribly sorry. As you know, there was no way I could contact you. I was on duty. I wasn't just being contrary. Betty has told me that you two are roommates and that you're a very nice lady. I certainly wouldn't have done anything inappropriate."

So I could see that she melted just a little bit, but she was obviously quite taken to be stood up that long, which I understood. So I took her to my car. I was driving, I think at that time, a 1939 German-made Ford car painted OD with US

numbers on it. The top had an opening. So we tooled over to the summer palace and went to the activity.

And we danced. We had the goodies, the food, the finger food and so forth. Everyone was having such a relaxed, wonderful— This had to be the first real wonderful, relaxed party probably since back in 1938. From then on it was war and you weren't partying. And I know it was the first party I'd been to since I'd left the States, probably before I was in uniform. So this was really great.

DePue: Was this the first date you'd had since you'd been?

Steele: Oh it was. It was the first date, absolutely. I'm sure I polished my shoes and I'm sure I did my best to look decent. Then I said to her, "Margery, you know, I've really enjoyed this." We're still up there. I said, "If you'd like coffee, we have a coffeepot on over at the billet." "I just love coffee. I would really enjoy that." So we went over to the billet, went into the kitchen and had a big pot of coffee. That date ended at five o'clock the next morning.

DePue: Well, can I ask what it was that the two of you were talking about?

Steele: Gee, at this stage of the game I can't really remember. But I was thinking as I looked at her, This is the first girl I've ever been with that I really do enjoy being in her company. Quite likely we were talking about home. Quite likely we were talking about our families, how we grew up. Quite likely we did not talk about business at all. And it was just a relaxed time of two people that just met to get acquainted. Nothing personal. More like, well, you're in New York? Whereabouts in New York? You're on the farm? What's the farm like? Probably that sort of thing. But I was really taken by her personality and her mannerisms.

DePue: Anything else that struck you about her? Because obviously you were very favorably impressed, and not just by those legs that were coming down the steps.

Steele: Yeah that's true. That's absolutely true. It's more the way in which she composed herself and talked with sincerity and yet with a high degree of humor. The kind of conversation where I didn't have to really say much, because I listened to her, it seemed like a good share of the time. She has a gift of communication and a gift of keeping your attention.

DePue: Well, Harold, I have to admit to you though, it took you a lot longer to explain the relationship than it did Margery when she told me about it. What happened after that first night?

Steele: It was a continuous date from then on and then we were married. (both laughing) We'd go out and I'd bring her home. It'd be late, late. And the Austrian at the door, he got to know us, and he'd just shake his head, like how can they keep doing this, how can they have that kind of energy.

DePue: They got to sleep sometime, huh?

Steele: Yeah they have to rest sometime. And they're both working.

DePue: Well, how long did it take you to figure out that Margery was the one?

Steele: I don't have a calendar in front of me. I'd really never dated very many girls. I was the shiest kid in high school. I was the shyest freshman at the University of Illinois. The shyest one ever at Farmhouse Fraternity. I just was not a socialite. I was at the farm. I'd never really—I'd been out with some girls, sure, but nothing that ever interested me in a second or third date till I met Marge. That somehow seemed to fulfill an unknown that existed. I got to meet a girl sometime, and that seemed to be the one.

DePue: When was it in this romance, if you will, that you let the folks at home know about what was going on?

Steele: Oh, it was pretty well solid before I let them know. Because I thought, Why disturb them with my social life? (DePue laughs) But I had a stack of letters about this deep.

DePue: Three, four inches deep.

Steele: I think my mother kept every letter that I wrote when I was at the university, when I was in military training, when I was in combat. But in combat you don't write very much. And then when I got to Vienna I had no time to write with her then because I was either investigating or I was with Marge. But when I did tell her about it, I'm sure that it was not in great detail. But I did remember another letter in answer to Mother. And it started out, Dear Dad and Mom. No, it was Dear Mother and Dad, it would have been. Please don't worry about Margery. Our marriage will be just fine. I understand why you're concerned for our different backgrounds, but please don't worry because you'll like her. So obviously my folks were—or at least my mother was—

DePue: This cosmopolitan big city girl, is that what they were concerned about?

Steele: Well yes. Because when I did call them there was a long silence and they said, "New York City?" (DePue laughs) And likewise Margery told me, "When I called my mother and told her there was a very short response that said, 'A farmer?'" (both laugh) So both sets of parents were extremely in shock about this marriage that was going to happen because we were so far enough away, nobody would stop it. It was going to happen.

DePue: They had cause to wonder about your judgment, 10,000 miles away.

Steele: Probably said, "Where did we go wrong raising that kid?"

DePue: But you didn't wait to get back to the States to get married, did you?

Steele: No, no, we didn't. We decided that we would be married right there in Austria. I said we. I don't know if she convinced me or if I convinced her or if it was mutual. But I would have to believe it was a mutual belief that this was the place to be married. After all, her folks were in New York, mine were in Illinois; there's going to be a lot of unnecessary traveling around. Let's do it here.

DePue: Do you remember the act of proposing to her?

Steele: It was very brief and probably was not too specific. (laughs) But I do remember she agreed that we'd get married. But I didn't ask her if she could cook. I didn't ask her if she could sew? I didn't ask her a lot of basic questions because I knew her. I just knew that she would know this. She asked me later, "Why didn't you ask me?" I said, "I didn't have to. I just knew you'd know what to do. And the fact that you believed in philosophy much as I did, that we tracked together on the important aspects of life." We didn't even talk about having a family. At least I didn't. I don't think she did. We didn't talk about that. We just talked about the world in general. We got through a war. And I just held her very high in esteem of a person, of a human being. And I thought I'd just like to spend a lot of time with her.

DePue: Well, you certainly have. How many years since that time?

Steele: Well, in October it'll be sixty-two.

DePue: And your anniversary date? Your wedding date?

Steele: Well, we had two weddings. His and hers. (both laugh) There's a US law that a person that's married in another country must be married by the civilian leadership of that country. In this case it'd be the Burgermeister of Vienna or his representative. And a representative of the State Department. As far as US government rules, regulations and laws are concerned, then you're married. But we said, "Okay, but let's go one step further. Let's have a real wedding as we're accustomed to at home with an ordained minister. In this case, it'll be a chaplain. Let's go to a church. Let's invite our friends. Let's have the kind of wedding that we are used to at home." And we said, "Absolutely."

Margery said, "Now I have a bit of a problem." "What's that?" "I really don't care for my commanding officer. I respect—" I don't know if she even said, "I respect his rank." She said, "I don't care for him." I said, "Margery, you've come to know my commanding officer, Colonel Yarborough." "Oh, he's such a dear." I said, "Then why don't you ask him if he would escort you down the aisle?" She did and he agreed. Absolutely. He'd be honored.

And then in a short time he said, "Margery, Norma and I've talked it over and we would be honored if you'd have your reception at our home." And we said, "Well, thank you. We would be glad for that." I'm not sure of the details. But then the British headquarters in their zone was the palace of Maria Theresa. Schonbrunn. This is the palace in Vienna. British headquarters. And they would make sure that we had the right facilities, because they had a chapel. They had a chapel in

Schonbrunn. They had taken an adjacent building, part of the whole structure, which was a museum of the royal family's—they didn't have automobiles –horse-drawn…

DePue: Carriage?

Steele: Carriage. Thank you. Carriages. Carriage house. And here was a really nice chapel. Hold maybe 150 people. So on that day—excuse me. Got to tell you. The first wedding day was on Saturday—

DePue: October.

Steele: October 12th, 1946. And we walked down to a city office building, quite tiny. The mayor's assistant was there and a State Department official was there. Margie had her maid of honor. I had my best man and an interpreter, one of our investigators was German-born, defected, came to America before Hitler got too strong. It went like this through the interpreter. "This is truly a day that you two will always remember. But let us first, as we peer through the window and hear the rustling of the leaves and the songs of the birds, this is truly a day that God designed just for you two." And he went on to paint this beautiful picture of God's creation. Then he got down to the real nuts and bolts of the cause of our being there. And through the interpreter he's going, "Will you do this and you do that?" And Margery's following just fine until he gets to this sentence. "Are you, Margery, determined to take this man as your lawful wedded husband?" And instead of following him, as she had always done immediately, it got real quiet in the room. He looked over his glasses at her. I looked over my shoulder at her. What seemed to be a half-hour. She said, "Well, no, I'm not determined!" (both laugh) I thought, Holy mackerel. So I said to Chenowski, "You better reinterpret that." So he went through it again and didn't use the word determined. She said later, "I would have had to have lived with that the rest of my life." And I said, "If I had had courage enough, I would have turned on two heels and got out of here, because this woman's going to be tough to get along with." (both laughing uproariously)

The next day we were all duded up. I'm now for the first time in uniform. She didn't know but a few days before this that I was military. She'd gone through one of the agents, Becker, whose mother was coming over to see him from California. She was going to stop in New York and pick up Margery's gown that Margery's mother was going to get for her, because you couldn't get clothes in Vienna. So she had brought this whole suitcase of her gown and things before the marriage.

So it happened that way. I called home. I said, "Dad, I need heavy cash. I'm getting married and then we're going to spend two weeks in Switzerland. I need big cash. Send me 500." (both laugh) And you know when that whole thing was over I had some change left. That's it.

DePue: Well, I think that's wonderful. Now, we're going to change the tenor just a little bit. We've got a few closing questions. I know you've already had a super interview with agriculture, but did you have something you wanted to mention here?

Steele: Yes. Some things happened in Vienna besides that of the defection. We had some very, very tough cases. One day an officer came to me and he said, "Harold, you and I really don't know one another too well. We've met. But I have information for you, but I'll give it to you only under the fact that it be nondisclosed." And I said, "I can do that because I can purposely accept information and not disclose the source as long as the person giving the information is not incriminating himself." So for an hour, an hour and a half or two hours, I kept copious notes of everything he told me on what his roommate had done some months before. And it was a bloodcurdling story. His roommate said, "I'm not sure if I really killed that girl or if I had a nightmare. I don't know. I don't know if that jeep had a lot of blood in it from her, if I really flushed it out. I don't know I've been living with this for some time, and from my own conscience I've got to tell you, I've got to tell you this whole story." And he did lay the whole thing out for me.

And I knew when I came to CID there two agents working on a murder case involving an Austrian girl and an American officer, an American officer of a certain rank of a certain branch of service. When he finished I immediately called two agents in that were on the case. I called them in. I said, "Fellows, start taking notes. I've got information here under the nondisclosure act that you're well acquainted with. It's a case you've been working on. Listen carefully." And I went through the whole thing. And they said, "My God, what's his name?" I said, "Fellows, you know I don't have to tell you. But with this information you're not going to have much trouble deciding who it is, nor who the suspect is. Go to it." They did. They put all the facts in a report. They interviewed all the people. CID wasn't to make judgment, but to gather facts, which we did. After the suspect was placed in confinement, his father, who was in international business –happened to be in Holland at the time – came to Vienna. He said, "My son has been the most perfect son I could ever hope for. He's never, ever caused me one moment of frustration or any one moment of wonderment, and now you're accusing him of murder." We went the extra route and had from Washington, DC—I'll call it a lie detector so we all understand—a lie detector and a licensed operator.

That was one case. There are many other cases.

DePue: Is it a name that you recall or you care to share?

Steele: I would not care to. I would just tell you that he was incarcerated at a place you and I talked about before in Kansas.

DePue: Fort Leavenworth.

Steele: He ended up in Fort Leavenworth . And just one other case that I'd go through quickly. I call it a case with Tiny Voroby. Tiny weighed about 350. He was a

Russian by birth, born in America. He was our Russian interpreter. Our Russian agent. Tiny and I were on duty one night and a radio message came in: "We've had an escape from the brig. Here's the description of this GI." And a full description. We took notes quickly. And it's believed that he went to a certain residence in a certain zone, which happened to be in the British zone. He has a girlfriend at that address. That's all we can tell you.

We immediately went screeching through the city. It's late at night. Tiny's car was a seven-passenger 1939 Opel with a live radio to headquarters. At that time in history, at nighttime the streets are bare of both people and vehicles. So we're in the area. We're getting close to the suspect's hideout. And Tiny says, "Gosh, I'm not sure where." There was a guy standing right on the street corner. Pulled up to him. I grabbed him, pulled him in the back seat. I knew enough German at that time and gave him the address in German and said, "Take us to it." Ja, ja, ja, ja, ja. And we go to it. Bitte, bitte, langsam, langsam, bitte langsam. We were going so fast it scared the bejesus out of him. He took us to the address. We left and he was gone when we came back.

Now it's probably close to midnight. The manager of this three or four story apartment complex, is the only one who can tell you who lives where; you have to go down to wake him up. Went down, woke him up on the first floor, and gave him the name of the female resident. He said, "Yes, she's in the top floor." I think it was the third floor. Down at the right side clear at the end.

So we walk up the steps. There was no other way to get up there. Tiny weighing 350. By the way, we're both in suits. He's got a 38 special with a two-inch barrel. I'm with a 32 caliber semiautomatic. Tiny looks at the door recess. It's about this much.

DePue: Open just a few inches.

Steele: He looks at his belly and he looks at door recess and motions, "You guard me." So I'm recessed as far as I can. I'm covering him. The apartment is clear at the end and there's a door. He's got his weapon right here in the ready position. Oh, I'd say about ten yards before he gets there, he builds up momentum, and when he gets to the door he holds one foot up and hits just below the door handle. **Bwhang, crash.** The plaster dust **flies up in the air**, and I can't see Tiny or the door. When the dust settles he's there like a snowman. He's white. Then I'm right behind him and we both go in. Guns ready. Room's empty. (both laughing) By now all the doors are open. These nightcaps are coming out. I found out what men and women wear on their heads at night in Austria. Nobody there. Tiny goes, "Whoop. That's the way it is."

Combat was different than being an investigator. You had to take care of the unforeseen. I could tell you more stories about the Russians, how the Russians took care of soldiers who violated instructions. They'd just take them out and shoot them. The Russians were not even supposed to speak to us. One got a little friendly,

he'd be gone, probably to northern Siberia. I thought, Freedom? They don't care one whit about people.

We got to go.

DePue: I know I must get you to supper. So is that where we want to end the interview? Can I ask just one or two—

Steele: We could probably talk for another hour, but—

DePue: Well, I would love to sit here and talk to you, but I feel an obligation to get you to your dinner engagement tonight. How do you think these war experiences changed you?

Steele: I learned in uniform to respect the flag, to respect the very essence of the words of the Constitution our founding fathers put in order, to a far greater degree than I ever would have before. I've also learned, in direct conflict with what I'm told as a youngster, "Son, you believe the teacher, you believe the minister, you believe the judge, you believe these professional people, because their word is gold." And I found out that's not so, anymore. Because I saw how the Russians worked. I saw how their leader led them astray.

But there's another story I must tell you to bring this out. One weekend when Margery and I went to Prague, Czechoslovakia in May, 1946, we took the train to Prague from Vienna. We went in civilian clothes. She was civilian anyway and I was in civilian clothes. I didn't have my shoulder holster, just my credentials as a passport. We went there to enjoy a weekend. Czechoslovakia was a free country. On this Saturday or Sunday morning we were out on a little park bench near the hotel. Such a beautiful, beautiful day in such a gorgeous city. We were approached by a gentleman, well dressed, in a suit. In very good English he said, "I see you're Americans." I said, "What's your clue?" He said, "Your shoes. They're a dead giveaway."

I said, "We aren't here to fool anyone. We're here to enjoy the weekend." And in the back of my mind I said, I bet you he went to the register of this hotel and checked us out. He said, "Let me tell you who I am. I'm" so-and-so, his name" I'm with a newspaper here in Prague. I've just come back from a tour of duty in Austria. I've been in the American, the French and English sectors. And over in the Russian areas. I want to tell you what I'm putting in my article for the paper. Over in the American, the British and French it's destitute. Those families have nothing at all. The families are broken up. They have nothing to eat, no beasts of burden. They've eaten them to survive. They have no spring crops. They have no seed to plant. It's terrible. But over in the Russian sector, oh, so differently. The people are so happy. The families are all together. All the spring crops are waving to and fro in the breezes. Oh, it is such a delight to see. Thanks to the Russians." He knew and we knew this was 180 degrees from the truth. But the Czechoslovakian people would

not know. One year later, Czechoslovakia fell to Communism without a shot being fired.

Twenty-one years after this, *National Geographic* magazine came to our house. I read with intense interest. This was an interview between some of the top editors of that magazine and the leaders of the Communist Party of of Czechoslovakia. It was a question and answer dialogue that made up the story. First question: "How did you possibly take over a country without firing a shot?" Answer: "It's very simple. First you control the media." I thought of that character in 1947. That character that came to us and identified himself. And then I thought, It fits. Their second question:. "You control the military or the police and you control the monetary system, you control the people." And I thought, I'll be. Margie and I got off of that ship from Europe, from Vienna to to New York City. We get off the ship, we go down the gangplank, and here's the newsman, a little boy with his big sack of papers.

"Read all about it. Get your paper here. Read all about the Communists in Hollywood, the Communists in Hollywood." And I said, "Marge, we just left those devils over there and now they're in Hollywood." And so today, when I read papers that demean our country, papers whose editors, whose feature writers are talking about all the bad things that we're doing in Iraq, and when we talk about all the negative things in America, I thought, Those lousy individuals. As a farmer I understand what happens when you have a very healthy 1,600-pound bull, a picture of health, the herd sire, and you put two lice on his back. These lice live from his blood and they multiply dramatically. Pretty soon his whole top line is black with lice and they crawl under his belly and get in his flanks, and they live from his blood. And if you don't spray that animal and kill those lice, get rid of them, he's going to die.

And we have a lot of lice in this free country that are here for one purpose, and that's to take away the freedoms under the Constitution, because they do not believe in our system, they do not believe in our fundamental principles of freedom of people, they do not believe in the doctrines of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.

DePue: One final question for you, I promise. What advice would you give to future generations, to people who'd be listening to this, to your grandchildren, to people in the future?

Steele: Exercise your responsibility of freedom. As we see so many times, freedom isn't free. Freedom is an obligation. I'm certain that you read about our founding fathers in grade school. If you didn't, then our school system's even worse than I'd hoped that it is. Certainly you would have read more about it in high school and had a good picture in college. But I'm not naive enough to know that all of the college professors also, there's some lice in that group, and you know who they are, because you've had to answer questions in order to pass the course that wasn't of your conviction, but you knew that was the professor's conviction. Exercise your

obligation of freedom. Read that Constitution. Read that Declaration of Independence, which is the foundation of the Constitution. And you know that document and you have it in your pocket. And when someone says to you, "I want to run for Congress, I want to run for the county board, I want to run for a public office," say, "Okay, let me ask you some questions." If they don't know the Constitution, say, "I will consider supporting you after you've read it and we can talk in an educated manner." If they do know the Constitution, find out what they will do if elected to support that Constitution. Do they believe in federal government's educational system? Do they believe in a medical system that's ministered from Washington? If they believe these things that are not within the confines of the Constitution, say, "You're not going to be re-elected, because there's enough of us working on the facts of life to know that we will not support you. We're going to support your opponent because we talked to that person and he supported." America's strength is in the quiet majority. We've got to take action now. Not next year, but now.

DePue: Thanks very much, Harold. I don't think there would be anyone who would ever say that you don't speak with conviction. You're very eloquent. The stories have been amazing. It's truly been my honor and pleasure to sit here and have the opportunity to hear them firsthand with you. So thank you very much.

Steele: Mark, I've come to know you through these visits. I admire you as a person and your ability to ask the right questions.

DePue: Thank you very much.

Steele: And further, I'd say, Thanks to the organization that you're with. Probably I could have done a lot better fifty years ago, because my mind would have been keener. But thanks that you did it before I'm buried. I would further say that Margery and I, every day, say how fortunate we are to be of health, how fortunate we are to be a family, how fortunate we are to be Americans, and how fortunate we are to know that the vast majority in the Middle West believes as we speak. And I wish that the two coasts would also pick up that sequence of thinking.

DePue: I think we'll end with that. Thank you very much, Harold.

Steele: You're welcome.

(end of interview)

End Note

When Harold Steele read the transcript of this interview, he sent the following note to Mark DePue, the interviewer and Director of Oral History at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. "Mark, as a point of interest as to "who first discovered Ohrdruf", it seems only God knows."