# Interview with John Beechler

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Interview #1: May 7, 2013

Interviewer: Mark R. DePue



DePue: Today is Tuesday, May 7, 2013. My name is Mark DePue. I'm the director of oral history at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. Today I'm honored to be interviewing John Beechler. Good morning, John.

Beechler: Good morning to you, sir.

DePue: We are here at the Quincy Veterans Home, where you've been, what, about a month now?

Beechler: Two months.

DePue: Two months. And you're formerly from the Springfield area?

Beechler: Yes.

DePue: John, what I always like to start with is a little bit about when and where you were born and then about growing up. So, when and where were you born?

Beechler: Okay. I was born December the 14th, 1929, at 1:15 p.m. in St. John's Hospital [Springfield, IL], and they kept me there until Christmas Eve. They kept you in the hospital longer then, than they do now.

DePue: You remember the precise minute you were born.

Beechler: Not really, but it was a blizzard out, and I've never liked snow since. Korea only deepened my disgust with winter.

DePue: Yeah, I'm sure that was the case. We should mention here that this is going to be part of our *Veterans Remember* project, and your story is an especially compelling story about your experiences in the last year of the war at Outpost Harry. For people who don't know anything about the Korean War, they should, shouldn't they?

Beechler: Yes, they should. It's very important, and very few people even know the war existed. It's depressing.

DePue: I'd like to have you tell me a little bit about your parents, if you could.

Beechler: I had a foster father, and my mother was the oldest of eight children in a family of Dennisses, two ss's on the end.

DePue: Dennisses?

Beechler: Yeah. Two ss's.

DePue: How do you spell that?

Beechler: D-e-n-n-i-s-s.

DePue: What was her first name?

Beechler: Edna Mae.

DePue: What else can you tell me about your father?

Beechler: I think…My name is Beechler, and it's legitimate on the birth certificate. But my real father, I believe, was a guy named Jack Curtis from Danville, who was president of the band in Danville. I found that much out. And he came to Springfield to work for Western Union, delivering telegrams. That's where he met my mother.

DePue: So I take it you didn't know your father at all, then?

Beechler: I never, never met my father.

DePue: Born in 1929, about two months after the beginning of the Great Depression.

Beechler: Yes. I always told people, when they found out I was going to be born, it caused the Depression, joke, joke.

DePue: I'm sure you didn't appreciate that necessarily, growing up during those very tough years. What was your mother doing to pay the bills?

Beechler: She was working at restaurants and housekeeping and different jobs, whatever. Everybody did whatever they could then, to get by, survive.

DePue: Were you growing up in Springfield, then?

Beechler: Yeah, I grew up in Springfield.

DePue: I understand that your grandparents had as big a hand in raising you as your mother did.

Beechler: Yes. From the time I was thirteen, they took…In fact, up until about six, and then again at thirteen, they took over and raised me, totally.

DePue: What were your grandparents' names?

Beechler: Denniss, D-e-n-n-i-s-s, Mae and Will.

DePue: Mae and Will. What did your grandfather do?

Beechler: He'd do odd jobs, stoking boilers, painting houses, cutting tree limbs, anything he could. He was a railroad man originally and spent most of thirty-some years on different railroads in the west.

DePue: Now I know from the first time we met that…I think, is on your maternal side of the family, your military lineage goes quite a ways back.

Beechler: Civil War. I think we had a captain in the Civil War on the North. My grandfather fought in Spain in 1904 and got wounded.

DePue: You mean in the Spanish-American War?

Beechler: The Spanish-American War. He was in the Philippines. I had a Long uncle that fought in World War I. I had an Uncle Buss that fought in World War II and was wounded at Cologne, and four other uncles that served but didn't see military action.

DePue: Did your grandfather serve in World War I, as well?

Beechler: No, he didn't. He just fought in the Spanish-American War.

DePue: Okay, that was your grandfather, then, the one who was raising you?

Beechler: The one that was raising me, yeah.

DePue: Did you grow up hearing the stories about his service during the Spanish-American War?

Beechler: Yes, I did, yeah, yeah. He told about going on patrols, and the Philippina guerillas would come down from behind with long knives and cut off heads. It was ferocious. He got wounded, but not killed.

DePue: Was he under any kind of disability that limited him?

Beechler: No, but the Spanish-American War set up a pension for Spanish-American War veterans. He got it for the rest of his life. I think he was getting about $69 a month when he died.

DePue: How much do you remember? You would have been pretty young during those years, but how much do you remember about growing up during the Depression?

Beechler: Well, I remember that, first of all, we lived out in Riverton, a town about seven miles east of Springfield. We lived in an old, two-story farmhouse. Our neighbor was a farmer that grew apples and vegetables and watermelon. We used to raid his tomato patch; I remember that.

One thing I remember very vividly is my Uncle Buss(??), whom I admired and loved deeply, put me in a little cart, horse cart, hit it on the ass and sent that down the hill. I was screaming and hollering bloody murder. That was my first fear I remember vividly. Got over it, though. Then we moved into Springfield.

DePue: Where in Springfield did you live?

Beechler: We lived on North Fifth Street, right off the square, in a three-story building. It had a liquor store on the first floor, our apartment on the second floor and a candy factory on the third floor. Right next to it was Walgreen's Drug Store, and below us was a liquor store.

DePue: It sounds like you were pretty close to downtown Springfield, then.

Beechler: Yes. I could walk over to the square. I mean, I could throw a rock and hit the square. We were just two buildings away from the square.

DePue: When you're talking about the square, you're talking about where the Old State Capitol is?

Beechler: Where the Old State Capitol is, yeah. At that time, it was the county courthouse.

DePue: I thought you had also mentioned that you lived for a time, or the family did, over in what was the Hay homes area?

Beechler: Yeah, but that was in my senior year in high school.

DePue: So that was quite a bit later.

Beechler: Yeah.

DePue: Tell me a little bit about the winter of 1936. Maybe that's another reason you don't like the snow.

Beechler: Oh, it was terribly bitter, and we got three feet of snow that I remember, all the time. School closed a lot, and my mom took me out of school. So I missed that grade.

DePue: You would have been seven at that time, so second grade?

Beechler: No, I was six, but I was pushed into seven as a first grader. And then, in the third grade, the classes wanted to move me up a course, because I was real good. They would take me to the eighth grade to teach them math. I was a third grader. I could do math problems that far ahead. But that wouldn't be allowed today. You can't insult the older kids, because you're brighter than they are. I happen to have an IQ of 144.

DePue: When did you find out what your IQ was?

Beechler: Not until I was in my forties or fifties. I was dating a girl that was a psychologist and took those kind of tests. She had to give a test for her boss, who wanted to get promoted and was head of a department of the state. She said, "I'm going to practice on you." I come in at 144, and he only come in at 143. (DePue laughs)

DePue: Was she surprised you scored that high?

Beechler: Yes, she was.

DePue: Did you know, when you were just a little tyke, that you were smarter than a lot of the other kids?

Beechler: I did, and I didn't. I had an eighth grade teacher named Holesgrave, and she gave me a test, an IQ test. When I graduated, in my little white book, she wrote that I had the ability to give the world something. Well, I thought, when I was laying there in Korea, I thought that was my life, you know. But it turned out that she knew I had the ability to be very bright and create something, which I was.

DePue: Were your grandparents or your mother religious? Were you going to church?

Beechler: They were Catholic, but they never went to church, because they didn't have the money to pay. I remember I resented the Catholic Church dunning them for not paying their annual dues. It made me mad. I never cared for the Catholic Church after that.

DePue: So you weren't going to church at all?

Beechler: No.

DePue: Were you ever baptized?

Beechler: Yeah, well I was baptized as a Catholic, you know, a little glop of water on your forehead. Every time my mom moved somewhere and took me with her, well, the neighbor always wanted to take me to church. So I got baptized about three times in the Baptist Church on the south side of Springfield, frustrating, drowning.

DePue: But apparently the neighbors were taking enough of a liking to you to make sure they were taking care of you, to a certain extent.

Beechler: Yeah, I must have been an interesting kid, I guess.

DePue: Any other memories about the Depression years, in particular?

Beechler: I remember, when we were at the farm in Rochester, my uncle would steal apples and watermelon and stuff like that from the farmer next door. I remember my grandfather would get on railroad cars—he'd been a railroad man—and throw off lumps of coal, so we had coal for warmth. We never went cold. All the kids worked at some job or another, making whatever they could.

DePue: Did you work, then, even at that young age?

Beechler: No, I didn't work then. When I moved out with my step-father on Park Avenue, at fourth grade, fifth grade, I worked on the farm. I cut one acre of lawn with a hand mower. I cut an acre, with a hoe, on the crop of vegetables we raised. I picked up the eggs from 300 hens. I cleaned out the chicken house, and I cleaned out the hog pen. I worked constantly.

DePue: You mentioned your step-father. Your mother got remarried, then?

Beechler: Yeah, she remarried then. I didn't realize this guy was bright, and he went out and bought three acres on Park Avenue. [It] took four months for them to make the decision. The house they'd bought on Ninth Street, they bought, remodeled and sold for $2,500. It took them six months to make up their mind to buy a house.

DePue: Do you look upon him as your father, during that time?

Beechler: I didn't like him, but he was really good for me. He taught me to work, a good work ethic. He worked all day at Hummer Manufacturing as a guard and chief of security, and then he…

I'm tired. Let me go back to my room and do this. Sorry.

DePue: We're going to have to stop here, then. Hang on.

(Pause in interview.)

DePue: We are back at it, doing an interview again. John, I think what I'd like to ask you next is if you remember Pearl Harbor?

Beechler: Oh, I remember it very well. It was December the 7th. It was about 11:00 a.m. We were sitting on the porch on North Fifth Street, in an apartment we lived in, the whole family. The radio came on and said the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. I remember it vividly. I remember my two uncles saying, "We'll kick the shit out of them in two weeks." They didn't understand at all. Then began the Great War.

I followed it very closely, all the battlefields. I followed the landings in Africa and the battle for those cities, across the northern coast of Africa, the English fighting from one side and the Americans coming from the other and the Germans caught in the middle. I remember the El Alamein [North Africa], and I remember Truk [Lagoon, Caroline Islands], which is a big port for departing, getting supplies for either side. I remember when the Americans first landed in '42, the 3rd Infantry Division and some others. They got the shit kicked out of them in their first battle.

DePue: That would have been North Africa?

Beechler: That was North Africa. I'm trying to think of the battle that they took a terrible beating. The Germans just kicked the shit out of them.

DePue: Kasserine Pass.

Beechler: Kasserine Pass [Tunisia, 1943]. That's right. That's right. And then they replaced that general with Patton [General George S.]. Then things started to happen. He was a magnificent general.

DePue: Do you remember reading about that? Were you going to the newsreels?

Beechler: No, I went to the newspaper every day and the radio, anything I could learn. I was glued to that war, the whole war, all the way through Africa, the landing in Sicily, the landing in Italy, the push up through Italy, the landing in southern France, the landing in Normandy and the push south, and the Russians pushing in from the east finally broke Stalingrad and came across. I remember it all, very vividly.

DePue: What was the mood of the country like, if you could describe that at the time?

Beechler: Very patriotic. They rationed sugar, and they rationed gasoline. You could only drive thirty-five miles an hour, crap like that. But we didn't need any of that. It's just that they needed to get the spirit up about war. The people weren't—

DePue: Did your grandfather find a different kind of work during the war?

Beechler: Oh yeah, he went out to Oregon and went to work for the shipyards, building ships. He was a painter for them. He worked there during the entire war, until the war was over.

DePue: Did you and your grandmother, though, stay back in Springfield?

Beechler: We stayed in Springfield with the other kids. My uncles, five of them, all went to the Army. My first uncle was married to my aunt, my blood aunt. She'd been married once before, to a guy named Neff and had had a daughter by him. That was my oldest cousin that I remember. I don't know if she's still alive or not. My aunt married a guy named Avert, and he went to the Army. My Aunt Naya's(??) husband was named Jim, and he went to the Philippines and all that area and Europe, not to Europe.

My Uncle Buss went to Europe. My uncle, the other three Raymonds all stayed in the states in different positions. Buss saw a lot of combat and got shot up at Cologne. The minute the war was over, he stole a deuce and a half truck with supplies, went and sold them on the black market and went on a holiday in Europe. (laughs) [He] knocked up a couple of German girls.

He was the most outstanding, fabulous uncle I ever had, gutsy, tough, mean. He looked out for me. Taught me a lot of bad things, but he taught me a lot of good things, too.

DePue: Did you lose any relatives in the war?

Beechler: No, none of them. Buss got shot through the arm, right straight through the arm, but he didn't die. It was an armor piercing bullet. They didn't have armored vests then. They did have helmets.

DePue: With that many relatives in the war, with your grandfather telling about his Spanish-American War experiences, I'm curious; were you upset that you were too young to get into the war yourself?

Beechler: Yes. At fifteen, I botched up my birth certificate, and I got a train to Chicago. I had bought a gun from a Jewish merchant on Sixth Street, Reisman. I went over, and I told him I wanted my money back for the gun. He said, "I'm not going to give you [your money back]. You bought it, and you're keeping it."

I said, "Look man, I'm not sixteen years old, and I can prove it. You'll be in big trouble for selling me that gun." He immediately gave me back my money. I was smarter than him. He was a smart man.

So, I got on a train to Chicago. Got off the train, went over to get a room on the north side and went up in this little room. Back in that time, there was a real popular song called "Here in the Gloom My Lonely Room" [*I Don't Want to go on Without You*]. I'm laying there in that room asleep and all of a sudden an elevated [the "L" train] come by. Hell, I never knew what an elevated was. Man, shit, I levitated to the ceiling. [It] scared the hell out of me.

So the next morning I went in, lied to the Marine sergeant. I wanted to join the Marines. I wanted to do my duty, and I was seventeen. He looked at my birth certificate and saw how it was botched up and said, "Son, you're not going to get to go to this one." He said, "You're too young for this one." He said, "You'll be too old for the next one." He said, "You can fight the next one."

I said, "Bullshit." I said, "I'll be too young for this one and too old for the next one. I won't get a war." I was really upset. Man, I wanted to fight. I mean, my whole family was fighting men, and they relished it.

So, I only had about $6 or $7 left, and that wasn't enough to take me home. So I went down to the bus station. I said, "How far will $7 take me?" And he said, "Oh, a little town…" I can't remember the name of the town now, but it went off the line and went into town, to the depot there and let you off. I got off there.

When I got into the station, I said, "Is the highway right here?" He said, "No, you've got to go out a mile. It will be about a mile walk." I said, "How far is it to Springfield?" He said, "One hundred and fifty-some miles." He said, "Have you got friends here?" I said, "No." He said, "Do you live here?" I said, "No." He said, "You got friends?" I said, "No." He said, "What the hell are you doing here?"

I said, "Well, they turned me down at the Marine Corps station in Chicago." I said, "I've got to go back home." I had twenty cents, I think, a dime. I had enough for a Coke, and I had a dime left over. So I walked out to the highway. It took seven rides to get home, twenty miles to a ride.

DePue: From what I understand, that was a time when everybody was hitchhiking. It was not unusual at all.

Beechler: No, no. But, I did get rides. I finally got home. Yeah, they'd pick me up. So I went into Springfield, but I didn't go to Grandma's. The first night I went to a friend's and stayed all night. Then, the next night I went home. She was

sitting out on the front porch. She didn't ask me where I'd been or a damn thing. And I said, "I'm home." (laughs)

DePue: Do you think she knew?

Beechler: Yeah, she knew. I said, "I tried to join the Marines, but they wouldn't take me."

DePue: Following the war as closely as you did, what were your thoughts when you heard about what the troops in Europe were discovering, about the Holocaust, with all the concentration and the death camps?

Beechler: I was shocked. I was shocked. I couldn't believe we didn't know. I think somebody held back. I don't know how the population at home would have held that. It was a terrible thing. I don't believe there were six million of them, but there were plenty of them, a lot of Poles. It was a horrifying thing.

DePue: How about hearing about the news in August, when they dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki?

Beechler: I was all for it. A lot of people say we shouldn't drop that bomb and kill all those people. Shit, we'd have killed many, many millions more if we had landed there. You know, Iwo Jima, 20,000 Japanese, 6,000 Marines killed.

The Marines lost more men, on a ratio. In offense, you're supposed to lose less than defense does. That wasn't true. They lost 20,000 Japs there and 6,000 Marines. It was ungodly.

DePue: Probably, at the time the war ended, are you in high school by that time?

Beechler: Yeah. I was a junior in high school.

DePue: What high school were you going to?

Beechler: Lanphier. I was a football star, made all city and all central conference. I was [on the] varsity debate team, arguing one world government. All the goddamned teachers were liberal, and they wanted a one world government. That was the stupidest idea that ever came up.

I had a guy, A+ Bapper(??). His father was the head of Concordia Seminary. He got A+ on every course he took. We had Jeannine Richter on the other side. She was an A+ student. I was an average student, because if I liked the subject I got straight A, and if I didn't like it, I got a B or a D or a C.

But anyhow, we'd go down to Williamsville, a little school that's 300, 400 [students]. We were 900 kids, and we never won a debate. Every one we lost, even in our own class, where we had all the same kids, all the same desires, all the same chasing football, chasing girls, same subjects in school

and everything. I was so disgusted, and man, I revved up; I really did a lot of research and found out, and I'd been—

DePue: You were arguing against one world government, then?

Beechler: I was arguing against it. It's not feasible; it's not sensible; it's not going to happen. They'll try to make it happen, but it won't happen.

DePue: Didn't you ever have to take the opposite position, though? Because I thought most debate teams, you had to be able to argue either side of it.

Beechler: No, we were always against one world. Jeannie Richter and the other kid, not Bappler, but the other one…I had Bappler. Bappler was brilliant. I mean, we made great arguments. We couldn't even get our own class to agree; they were about 50/50.

I said, "Now, you've got a world out there with 187 countries, that many or more languages and dialects, economical interests, political interests." I said, "You think you can put that together and make it work? It's impossible; it's ridiculous; it's stupid. [I] never got anywhere, man.

DePue: Having been in the position where you're arguing against one world government, what were your views, at the time, about the communist part of the world?

Beechler: Well, I thought the communists had to be defeated. I was all for kicking the shit out of them then.

DePue: Even though Russia was our ally during World War II?

Beechler: Well, I took advantage of that. I was rooting for the Russians, but 1945, Russia, our ally, China, our ally. Nineteen fifty, Russia, our enemy, China, our enemy.

DePue: It didn't take long for that to change, then.

Beechler: No, it didn't. I was for Patton. I would have gone right into Russia and kicked the shit out of them. We had the men on the field. We could cut off their supplies. They were a terrible economy; their people were in bad shape, good soldiers, gutsy soldiers.

DePue: Did you graduate in 1946, '47 timeframe?

Beechler: No, '49. I skipped out, dropped out, you know.

DePue: Why did you drop out of school?

Beechler: They sent me to Springfield High School instead of Lanphier, and all my classmates went to Lanphier.

DePue: Would that been your senior year? Should have been your senior year?

Beechler: No, I dropped out my freshman year. I was going to Springfield High. I was smart. I didn't know at the time, but I was sitting right behind Governor Green's daughter at Springfield High. We had some great teachers there, good school.

But I went to a basketball game, and this guy was pushing a mop across the floor, a janitor. I said, "Beechler, you dumb son of a bitch, if you don't go back to school, you're going to be pushing a broom. You're not going anywhere. You're smarter than that. I don't know how smart you are, but you're smarter than that."

So, I went down next day and enrolled. They put me in a class which was having an IQ test. [I was] about twenty to thirty minutes late. So I did the IQ and only put twenty minutes in on it. I come out with 102. My IQ was 145, but I didn't know it. They didn't know it. To point out, if I liked a subject, I got A. If I didn't, I got a B or a D or dropped out.

I was on the varsity debate team, against one world government. I went and sold all the ads for the *Lanphier Life*, for the school, for the whole school. I'd go out, and I'd play football. But after football, I didn't play basketball. So, I'd go down and sell the ads, and I'd bring them back. I say, "Look teach, I can get this teacher's ad and this teacher's ad, if you'll let me take Gene Seegan(??) with me to get them. They like him."

She'd let us out of school, so we'd miss an hour of school. He and I'd go down and goof off on the avenue. I'd take back the checks. They were dated the day before. The dumb teachers never even looked to see. (both laugh)

DePue: John, what were you doing during the time when you dropped out of school?

Beechler: I went to work for a meat market at Ninth [St.] and…Tony and Martin and Mark, he had the butchering part, and Morton had the grocery part. His brother made Ray's Chili. I worked for them. We had a barrel full of, not horseradish—

DePue: Pickles?

Beechler: No, that other stuff.

DePue: I bet you're talking about sauerkraut.

Beechler: Yeah, sauerkraut, yeah. I used to have to clean out the sauerkraut barrel every week, and I sliced meat. I learned about all cuts of meat. He had an old Chevy coupe, and he wrapped brown paper on huge chunks of real rich, good meat. He'd put in there and let it…it got so it had hair on it that deep. When the spring came, we broke open a car and broke out the meat and broke open the paper and took it in and sliced all the hair and stuff off of the meat.

He'd send it to the best restaurants in Springfield for their steaks. I said, "How can anybody eat that rotten stuff?" He took me to the restaurant and bought me a steak. It was the best food I ever…I learned about filet mignons that had aged, and I've been a well-aged filet man ever since.

DePue: What did your grandparents think about, first, you dropping out of school, and then going back to school?

Beechler: They didn't say a thing. They didn't care either way. [If] I didn't want to go to school that day, I didn't.

DePue: Were they just not believers themselves in the value of education?

Beechler: Well, nobody in the family, except my Uncle Al, had more than an eighth grade in school, and they were all doing well. Of course, the war, it was pretty easy to do well. You worked at Illiopolis.

Grandpa caught a train and went out to Oregon and painted ships for the shipyards, Kaiser [Henry J. Kaiser, industrialist]. He thought he was the greatest guy on earth. Grandpa had been making $5 a week, if he was lucky, and he was getting $9 a day out there. So, man, this guy's a wonderful man. Of course, he went on and built Kaiser Aluminum and Kaiser Automobile, all of them failures. Well, Kaiser Aluminum's still around.

DePue: What year did you graduate?

Beechler: I finally graduated in 1949. I should have graduated in '46.

DePue: Were you going to school then, high school, with some kids who had also dropped out of school, gotten in the Army and then came back home?

Beechler: Yeah, some of them, some of them. But most of them were younger than me. My class was all younger, about two years.

DePue: Any problems with being the old kid in the classes?

Beechler: No. I took charge. (both laugh)

DePue: Were you dating during those years?

Beechler: Oh, man, forty-seven girls, during high school football. I was a lover boy. I've seduced over 308 women in my life. I've been terrible, a terrible philanderer. I'm ashamed of myself.

DePue: You're keeping score, though.

Beechler: I did keep score, yeah.

DePue: What was the reason you were keeping score?

Beechler: My ego, I guess.

DePue: When you were getting close to graduation in '49, what did you want to do with your life?

Beechler: Well, every year in the summer, my sophomore and junior and senior year, I went up and worked in Chicago. I worked for Chicago Bridge and Iron, because my uncle worked for them. They were the steeplejack people that built water towers.

The second year I went up, they wouldn't take me back, because I told them I was going to college, and they knew I'd lied. The second year, I went to work for U. S. Steel, on an electric furnace. That was a hell of an experience. I loved that job. [I] made good money, made over $100 a week.

DePue: Working in the blast furnace?

Beechler: In the steel mill, yeah. We worked nine hours. I took a…I think I told you the story. I was trying to learn dance lessons. I couldn't dance for shit. I knew, at high school, you'd go out on a dance floor and pick up girls. That's how you picked up girls, so I had to dance. I went to this dance studio, Fred Astaire, I think, or one of the others, maybe Gene Kelly. There was a Polish girl there. I started dating her. I took her to the Riverview Park. It had all the rides—

DePue: What park was this?

Beechler: Riverview Park. Are you familiar with it? It's a famous park up there. They had a parachute ride. They put you in a bucket seat, took you up 250 feet and let you go for about thirty feet, freefall. It was scarier than jumping out of airplanes, I am telling you, because I've done both.

I took her home this night from the park. We went by all these kids standing at this pole. She said to the boys, "It's alright fellas." We went down the road a little ways, and I said, "What the hell, you told them it was alright." "I told them it was alright to let you out." They didn't let people out. They pounded the hell out of them. The neighborhoods were very Polish, Jewish, French, Italian, especially. They just didn't get along. They fought and battled and stole from each other. So I asked her, I said, "Why did you tell them

that?" She said, "I told them it was okay to let you out of here. Otherwise, they would have probably held you up and taken whatever you had."

DePue: Did you have any thought at all about going to college?

Beechler: Yeah, I did, actually, when I came home from the Army. I went to—

DePue: But not when you first graduated from high school?

Beechler: No. My coach was a Ralic(??). He was a Jewish guy, and he was a bright guy. He'd gone to a school up in Wisconsin. It was a small school. I'd been all city and all central conference. Probably, if the coach hadn't pulled me out for three games for insubordination in my junior year, I'd have probably made honorable state. I was good. I was meaner than hell, man.

DePue: What position did you play?

Beechler: Left wing, and I could catch passes. Only one time in my life, I dropped passes. But Daub(??) threw me a…I said, "Don't throw me that catch. I won't be able to catch it." He said, "You can catch it, man; you catch everything." Well, I dropped it three times in a row. He pissed me off so much. I said, "Any other pass you throw me, I'll catch, Daub." So a sub came in and caught a touchdown pass. Man, did I look bad. (laughs)

DePue: Well, it wasn't too long after you graduated, you get to 1950. What were you doing at that time?

Beechler: After I graduated in '49, I went to Chicago and went to work for Chicago Bridge and Iron…No, I worked for Armour Packing, as a welder in their maintenance department.

DePue: Do you remember June 25th? That's the day that the North Koreans invaded the south?

Beechler: Yes, I remember very vividly. I'd come home every weekend. I had a girl here. I'd ride the train. It cost $2 and ninety-some cents. I remember my first experience in a dining car. I'd ride up on a car. I'd put a dime in the lock box, in Chicago station, so I could catch it back to home, to where I worked. That's how I got up and back each time.

My buddy picked me up at the railroad station. We'd go to a cat house on Jefferson Street, some Chinese place, Joy Ling or something. An older lady, a college graduate, a barber, ran the place. She was good looking, built, good in bed. [She] didn't go to bed with very many guys, but she'd go to bed with Gene and I. She liked us. We'd sit and have tea afterwards. I'd go first, if they were full, because Gene didn't have…I mean, I couldn't wait for Gene, in case the train left.

So I'd be on the train, and Gene would run over and hop on the train with me and stay there until the train pulled out. Off I'd go to Chicago, every Sunday night, late at night. I'd get into Chicago at 6:00, catch a rail car, you know, a passenger train, into the station and then into the depot, out to my apartment building, and then, from there, I caught a bus. I had money at home to buy me a new bus [ticket].

DePue: What do you remember? In June of 1950, I suspect most Americans had no idea, even where Korea was. Did you at the time?

Beechler: No, I didn't know where it was. I went to a map right away, of course, and saw where it was. It was off the Sea of China, off of Japan. There's a peninsula, about 200 miles long, 100 and some miles apart, South Korea and North Korea.

Syngman Rhee [president of South Korea] and that other joker that was head of the front part…Are we running out of time?

DePue: No. Did you think, now here's the war I can get into?

Beechler: Yep, and I did.

DePue: How quickly did you try to enlist, after that?

Beechler: The war was in June. I was walking down Fifth Street, where the Illinois Railroad track was. There was a friend of mine, who'd been in World War II, and they called him back. I went up to him. He was kissing his wife and baby good-bye. I said, "You no good son of a bitch." (emotionally) Here's a guy with a wife and a child, and he's going back a second time. He saw four years. You've got to go. So I walked over there…Emotional, emotional.

I walked over to the Army, and I said to the sergeant, I said, "If I join the Army, can I become an officer, honest?" He said, "I'll give you a test". He said, "Man, you won't have a problem at all." So he gave me this test, and I scored ninety-nine on it. I took the test, and I said, "Now, look," I said, "I just got a new girlfriend, and I want to be here for Christmas with her." I said, "I just got a job at Pillsbury, and I've got to stay ninety days, so I can come back and get my job." So I said, "I want to join, right after the first of January. Is that okay?" He let me do it, and that's what happened.

I thought that guy might be lying to me. But I took a chance. I was young and naïve. So it worked out, just that way. On January 11th, I was shipped to Chicago and inducted and sent down to Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri that night, on a train. [I] spent about six months in Missouri, getting training there.

DePue: I wanted to ask you, because, while you're waiting to go to basic training, you get to late November, December and early January, the war in Korea is going horribly. How closely were you paying attention to that?

Beechler: I was watching every day. I knew what was going on. I wanted to get there. I wanted to fight.

DePue: That didn't deter you at all?

Beechler: No. I'm an American soldier, I mean, an American citizen, in a war. What the shit? That's where you belong. I don't care what anybody says. I mean, we can't have everybody in the war. I mean, one out of seven actually ever ends up in combat, but that didn't bother me, either.

There'd be guys in the back of the lines, and they'd say, "Oh, them sons-a-bitches are back there in the rear area. They're not getting in combat; it's not fair." I said, "You dumb son of a bitch, you've got to have seven men from the front line in combat to a guy back home, making ammunition or driving a truck to haul gasoline to take ammunition to the dock." I said, "Quit worrying about it. Just take whatever share you can handle, and do it." I went all the way. When I got to Fort Leonard Wood, I volunteered for leadership school. Then, when I passed that, I signed up for Officers Candidate School [OCS].

DePue: Why did you join the Army? You'd wanted to get into the Marine Corps during World War II.

Beechler: Well, I thought I'd have more chance of being an officer in the Marines. I don't know, plus, I wanted to be a paratroopers, and the Army didn't have paratroopers anymore.

DePue: You mean the Marines didn't.

Beechler: The Marines didn't have paratroopers anymore, no.

DePue: Any memories about going to basic training at Fort Leonard Wood?

Beechler: Oh, yeah. It was terribly cold that winter. We froze our ass off. The barracks were World War II barracks, and they still had wooden barracks, ice on the floor. We wet down the floor and mopped them up. When we went home on leave on weekends, the ice was still on the floor.

It was only 200 and some miles, so I paid ten bucks to a guy to drive. He'd drive ninety miles an hour on 66 [U. S. Route 66], from Fort Leonard Wood to Springfield and drop me off on the bypass. The family would pick me up. While I was making those trips, off basic training, we lost nine guys killed on 66, going up. One time, we passed these guys and pulled over, because there was a little coupe, with six guys in it. Two were laying out

dead; one was dying, asking for air, breath; and one of them laid there and said, "I'm out of breath." He died while we were waiting.

DePue: Do you remember any of your instructors, your drill instructors?

Beechler: One lieutenant. We had a campaign, and we got on this bunch of guys. I took some with me, and we went to the back, behind the lines, to come in from behind. Well, there was defense positions back there, and I attacked the defense positions. They said, "Put down your arms." I didn't pay any attention to them. I kept on. My men stayed there and surrendered.

I got a little further, and I come up on this lieutenant. I said, "Lieutenant, Captain so and so, up in the front, wants you to…" These were our enemy. So, when we got right to the lines, I put my gun in his back—he was a World War II veteran; Sommers was a good man—all of the sudden, I knew I was on the ground, and his bayonet was in my back. (laughs) He was in World War II.

I said, "You're under arrest sir. I'm capturing you for the other side." He said, "No, you're my prisoner." All of a sudden, I looked up, and I was flat on my ass on the ground. He got me up and took me in, and I was a prisoner. I escaped from there. I didn't pay attention to their bayonets or anything. Anyhow—

DePue: Do you think the training you got in basic training was pretty good?

Beechler: It was excellent training, yeah. It was cold and wet, hot. I stepped right over a copperhead one night, and the guy behind me bashed him with his rifle. I think he saved my life; I don't know.

DePue: How did you get your chance to become an officer? How did that occur?

Beechler: I applied for Officers Candidate School.

DePue: While in basic training?

Beechler: While in basic training. I passed, and I had three choices, armor, tank and infantry. They put me on the artillery, because I had real high scores, and you've got to use a lot of math in the artillery. You need to know.

DePue: So you had the choice of infantry, armor or field artillery?

Beechler: No, they had the choice of choosing me for one of them, and they sent me in artillery.

DePue: So you didn't get to choose artillery; they sent you there.

Beechler: They sent me there, but I asked for…I was willing to go to any one of the three. It's the toughest, artillery school. Shit, we did study hall, six nights a week.

DePue: You did what?

Beechler: Study hall, six nights a week. I went to Benning to go to jump school. Those guys didn't even go to night school, except about four or five nights. They got to go to movies; they got to go to stuff like that, off base. We didn't do any of that, man. I didn't get off base, except for approval for emergencies, until I was a junior, I mean an upper candidate.

DePue: Where did you go to the Officer Candidate School?

Beechler: Fort Sill, Oklahoma.

DePue: That's the field artillery school?

Beechler: Yeah.

DePue: So, everybody who's going through that OCS is going to become an officer in the field artillery?

Beechler: Goes there, even the West Point go there for advanced artillery training. If you're artillery, you'll end up at Fort Sill sometime or another.

DePue: When did you get to Fort Sill, and how long was your OCS?

Beechler: I got there in July. The temperature was a 105, 110, twenty below. It was terrible. Shit, they made Korea look like a soft spot. It did.

DePue: In terms of the heat?

Beechler: Yeah, and we had an officer, captain, called Captain Hatton, no, not Captain Hatton. What the hell was his name? Anyhow, he'd come out at 5:00 in the morning, and you had to be down doing the daily dozen. He'd say, as loud as he could, "Get off your knees, G Battery. What's wrong with you?" I did the daily dozen, first thing in the morning. [I] did the drill dozen in the evening. We didn't get to go play basketball or anything like the infantry did.

DePue: What's the daily dozen?

Beechler: Pushups, sit-ups, squat jumps.

DePue: So, twelve different exercises.

Beechler: Twelve different exercises. I could do 200 pushups; I could do 600 squat jumps. When I went to jump school, a corporal could give you orders, even if you're a general. He said, "Lieutenant, give me ten pushups." I wanted to say

to him, "With which hand, corporal?" (laughs) But I went down; I could do ten pushups with one hand.

DePue: Which did you find was more challenging, the basic training you went through or the Officer Candidate School?

Beechler: Officers Candidate was the toughest school I've ever been in. When your RA [regular Army] guys went out to Fort Sill, they told one of my buddies, who was a captain then—regular Army, he graduated second in class—they told him that the hazing at West Point, the first, year didn't compare with the hazing we had at officers school. So, so much for that, West Point. (laughs)

DePue: Why study hall every night? What was so challenging about—

Beechler: Math. See, I went in there on Monday. They gave me a logarithm book, and I didn't know what in the hell it was. I'd never taken the math for it. By Friday at noon, I passed. I have a year of—

DePue: Was it the computing of the firing data that was so challenging?

Beechler: Yeah. See, I'd never seen a logarithm book. They handed me that thing. What the hell is this? I mean, I got straight A on all my math. I was brilliant in math. They took me in the third grade, up to the seventh grade, and I did the math for the eighth graders. They wouldn't let you do that today. It'd be politically incorrect.

DePue: Did you feel like, after you got in the school and got the feel of the computations and the mathematics side of it, did you feel like this was the thing you were supposed to me doing?

Beechler: Yeah, definitely. I still had a tough time with math, but I pulled through. I was a great artillery officer, man. We had a hill out in front of us, called Star Mass. I'm sure that it was a Russian officer; I'd swear he was. But, anyhow, he'd come up there, and he had this unusual uniform on. He was obviously an officer. I'd get on the short side of him, with one round. I was so good, he thought he could stay there until the third round, but he couldn't. I took him out the second. I saw his map and his uniform and himself, the second round. I never had a target in Korea I didn't hit in the second round. I was that good.

Of course, front line, same line, you know, you got familiar. But, of all my medals and decorations from the Greeks and everything else, the thing I was most proud of was that Captain Hatton, who was my battery commander. When I came back from the field, for my meal one day, I walked in, and he said, "There's the coolest, calmest, son of a bitch I've ever seen." I turned, and I looked both ways. He said, "You, Beechler, you. I've never seen anyone cooler."

I'd been up with the Greeks, and we lost three killed and ten wounded that night. I was telling them, "I think you need to send me up an insurance man. I feel a need for additional coverage." (laughs) I laughed. I had the men laughing. I had a little red turtle, and he'd swing. I'd reach up and touch him, and I said, "Cool yourself, son of a bitch, cool off. You're a cool soldier." And the men would all laugh.

My men would follow me anywhere. If I went out of a bunker, they went. After that, if I told them to go, they went. I followed, of course, but they knew I would.

DePue: I want to take you back to Fort Sill. So, you got done with Officer Candidate School and then went straight into field artillery officer training course?

Beechler: No, I went from Fort Sill to Fort Benning, Georgia, for airborne training.

DePue: Was Officer Candidate School the same thing as learning the field artillery basic stuff?

Beechler: Play that back.

DePue: Well, the West Pointers wouldn't have been going through the Officer Candidate School.

Beechler: No, but they went to jump school. Most of them realized they needed a jump commission. I served with a lot of them.

DePue: Was the Officer Candidate School a different school? Then, right after that, at Fort Sill, you're taking some more field artillery training?

Beechler: No. I got my officer's training, became a lieutenant, went to Fort Sill, got my jump school training, then I immediately went to a four week school of airborne training, so I got four more jumps. That put me way ahead of my class. At Benning, they made you jump an extra jump, over the enlisted men. We stayed an extra week. So, when you went out, that man you just jumped out of officer school with, you had at least one jump more than he did.

DePue: Why did you want to go to jump school, then?

Beechler: A hundred dollars pay.

DePue: A hundred dollars pay?

Beechler: A hundred dollars. I got $232 as a jump school and only got $232 as a first lieutenant, shit.

DePue: So you got $100 more each month.

Beechler: Every month, whether you jumped or not. You only had to jump once every three months. That pisses me off. When I got to Korea, they took my $100 jump pay and gave me $45 jump pay.

DePue: Jump pay or combat pay, once you got to Korea?

Beechler: They cut me to combat pay, $45. I'm sorry; I'm a little juggled here.

DePue: Where did you go after you got done with jump school?

Beechler: Well, I went to Fort Campbell, Kentucky, as a battery forward observer. I had a West Point officer was my commander. I didn't like that son of a bitch. He was the dumbest bastard I ever…I never run into a West Point officer as dumb as him. Honest to god, I can't believe they graduated him.

DePue: Well, maybe he was playing football there.

Beechler: No, he wasn't that good. He wasn't that good at anything. He wasn't that good at being an officer, either.

DePue: What was the unit you were assigned to at Fort Campbell?

Beechler: It was 69th Field Artillery Battalion, I think. I was one of the forward observers, of course.

DePue: What was the division you were in?

Beechler: The 11th Airborne Division.

DePue: The 11th is one that most people never hear about.

Beechler: No. See, it fought in the Philippines. The 82nd and the 101 and the other ones fought in Europe. It was the only one that got to Asia. In fact, they're still up there now. They're up in Hokkaido, two of the regiments.

DePue: But you enlisted, so you can go fight in the Korean War. The war's still going on. What were your thoughts about being sent to Fort Campbell, then?

Beechler: Well, I wanted the airborne training behind me, because I would hope to make a combat jump in Korea. They made two, you know, but I never got to.

When I go to Japan, I called up Hokkaido. The artillery officer up there says, "Man, I need ten artillery officers. I'll cut your papers; you'll be here tomorrow." I said, "You going to go back in?" He said, "No, I doubt it very much." He said, "As long as we're out, we hold more Chinese out of the front lines than if we were in. They've got to hold out."

So, I said, "Well, I'm sorry sir, I'm a combat officer; this a combat arm. I want to see combat." (laughs) He said, "Well, I wish you well, young

man, but," he said, "I could have you here tomorrow." I didn't; I went the next day. Four days later I was in Japan.

DePue: So, it took you just—

Beechler: I mean, no, I was in Japan, and four days later I was in Korea.

DePue: You lost me there, to a certain extent, because I was going to ask you how you got out of the tour that you were assigned to at Fort Campbell. Is that the story?

Beechler: I went to Campbell, served six months, volunteered for Korea. When I got to Japan, the guy wanted me to come up to Hokkaido and serve as the 11th, and I passed him up.

(responding to someone at the door) Come in.

DePue: When did you leave Fort Campbell, then? What timeframe was that?

Beechler: I left, I think, early December and went home on leave. And on the 22nd of December, I got on a Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul…Well, Illinois Central first. My girlfriend went up with me. Then I got on a train, and my girlfriend went up with me. Then she left and went back home, and I went to Seattle.

But we got in a train wreck, somewhere in the western side, almost into Iowa. No, it **was** in Iowa. [It] went through Montana and all the other states, had a wreck.

DePue: Do you remember anything about the wreck?

Beechler: A great deal. I was an officer. Our car went down the tracks, but it had turned over; the lights were still on. I went and got down and looked out. Well, it was upside…I got up, and I said, "I'm a second lieutenant data rank. Is there anybody who outranks me?" I gave them my rank, and nobody out-ranked me.

So I said, "This is what you do. I want the men to stay up here and take the women up to the line, up there. The railroad people will get you coffee and food and stuff." I said, "All the military men stay down below with me." I said, "All the enlisted men stay with me. You'll follow me down to the next car. We're going to rescue the people that are down there." Everybody did just what I said.

I went down, and I looked. Cars were overturned. We picked up two broken back women and got some stretcher-like things and helped them up. There was a colonel in the Air Force, up above, and he got real sheets and stuff and sent them down to us. And we took civilians out. I gave a little old

lady…She couldn't find her coat, so I gave her a coat. They all went up to the top of the line.

I said, "When you get up there, send somebody up to the train depot and get pots of coffee." I tell them, "Charge it to the Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul. Charge it to them." I said, "We'll go down and help below." So, we got them all out, and I finally got up to the car.

The lady was there, and she had found her coat, so she gave me her coat back. I'd give her my coat. She gave me her card and wrote me a letter, every year until, I guess, she died. She was eighty-some years old. She sent me a Christmas card every year.

You know, the goddamn newspapers in Washington didn't say a word about all the soldiers, what they did and how they'd helped out. I was so pissed off.

DePue: Well, that's not your normal trip to overseas combat.

Beechler: No, it isn't. I was supposed to fly, but they needed more officers on the train.

DePue: Would you have been flying to Seattle, then?

Beechler: I would have been flying to Seattle, and I would have been flying from there to Alaska. And I would have been to every state in the union. Didn't make it; haven't been there yet.

DePue: Then how did you get across the ocean, on a Liberty ship[1]?

Beechler: They brought me to Seattle and put me on a Liberty ship.

DePue: Anything memorable about that trip?

Beechler: Yeah, it was seventeen days. One day we only made seventeen knots. We had 3,000 men on the ship.

[I] had an officer with me. They'd built the first mechanical car wash, and his father and he lived right next door to Robert Taft. He was a very educated man. He said, "If we can find one of those Russian tanks…" I said, "We'll get home. We'll get home right away." I said, "I want to fight. I want to fight." He went his way, and I went my way. I never know what happened to him, but I'm sure he got back home alright. He was a mechanical engineer, a brilliant kid. Then the rest of the story is Korea.

DePue: Apparently you made a stop in Japan. Where was that, Yokohama?

[1] The name given to the EC2 type ship designed for "emergency" construction by the United States Maritime Commission in World War II. (http://www.usmm.org/libertyships.html)

Beechler: Yeah. I went down, took a day off and went to Tokyo, visited the cat houses. They took me to an officer house, for officers and civilians only, no enlisted men. For $19, I got a girl for all night, meals, sake, warm bed, the whole works.

They brought the girls out, just like they do in America, but I wouldn't choose first. I was used to going through the whole rack, until I got one I liked. So, finally this girl came out. God, she was Hollywood beautiful, but I wanted to see them all. So I didn't take her. So I called them back a second time, called them back a third time. I finally picked her. She was better than most Hollywood stars. She said to me…When we got in bed, she was very cool. She said, "You not like me?" I said, "Oh, I love you; you're beautiful." She said, "Well, why did you not pick me first?" I explained to her how America worked, and she said, "I'm not happy with you, but," she said, "I will service you well." And she did. The bed broke down, and we ended up on a mattress.

When we left, she took a ride back. I doubt that she got very much of that $19. I told her I wished her well and Merry Christmas. She said to me… She held my hand, and she said, "I wish you well, and I hope that you get home. I wish you a long, happy life," So I gave her some extra money that I had. Man, she was gorgeous, I mean, gorgeous, had youth and good in bed. She knew how to do it. You know what, I never took oral sex with her, though. I just had regular sex. I wasn't too high on oral sex at that time.

DePue: How did you get from Japan to Korea then?

Beechler: Hiroko(??). They needed a top air courier with some top secret papers, so they latched onto this briefcase. I already had one secret briefcase for orders. They had me on one arm, and they had me tapped on the other one. So they hooked me all up and put me on a plane first, first one to get on, last one to get off. If that plane went down, my job was to go down with it. [They were] probably some love letters from some goddamn general, not the secret papers at all. So that was the story. [We] landed in Pusan, about twenty degrees, temperature.

DePue: This would have been January.

Beechler: January the 11th. It was cold; the wind was blowing. When it blows down there, it's a hell of a lot colder than it is.

DePue: What's your first impression then of Korea, once you arrived there?

Beechler: Barren, ugly, wasteland. We flew in off the sea in a DC3.

DePue: You'd seen enough of Japan. How would you contrast or compare those two countries?

Beechler: Oh, there's no comparison in the world. Japan had Toyota, I mean—

DePue: Tokyo?

Beechler: Tokyo. I went to Tokyo, went down on the Ginza. [It] had beautiful shops. I had a Japanese artist take a picture of my girlfriend and paint a larger picture and sent it back home to her. I just went to two cat houses, but I only…One girl, she was a call girl. If she wanted to go to bed with you, she did. If she didn't, she took you to bed. It was her choice.

The other one, I got at $19. We talked. [She was] lovely, bright, good looking. She said…She didn't make love to me. No, she did make love to me, I'm sorry, three times.

Then I said, "Why do you do this?" She said, "The money is excellent." She said, "I only get a fraction of what you're paying here, but," she said "when I'm about twenty-six or twenty-seven, I'll be too old for the business. No Japanese boy will marry me. Japanese soldiers won't marry me, because I've slept with American soldiers." So, she said, "But in the meantime, I've had all these clothes. I give all the clothes to my best friend. She will marry a Japanese boy and have a family, and I'll kill myself. I'll commit suicide. I'll have had the good life, a rich life, and I'll be well off. I'll live very well, much better than any of the Japanese girls."

That was her philosophy. I saw a bike ride and this girl I was with, chatting with her, and this kid died. They all stand there laughing, and they said, "But my girlfriend will have a nice home, be married and will have children of her own and that kind of stuff." That was shocking to me.

DePue: But what you're talking about here is the life and culture in Japan, correct?

Beechler: Yes, yeah.

DePue: How was Korea different, just visually and the smells and the sights?

Beechler: Well, Korea [he meant Japan] was fully developed. They were doing big manufacturing, because of our war effort. You see, by the time I got there, they were making most of the stuff we needed in Korea. So, their society was doing well off. Like I said, when they got off the boat, this guy gave…I asked this painter, this shipman on the boat, the little ship we were on, I said, "How much do you get paid for doing that?" He said, "Ten dollars." I said, "Ten dollars a day?" He said, "Ten dollars a month."

DePue: That's in Japan?

Beechler: In Japan, $10 a month.

DePue: But, from what you said, Korea was quite a bit different.

Beechler: Oh, Korea was…Korea was probably not even a dollar. I mean, Korea was… They'd do anything. I told you about the little girl that came up to me, "Good clean virgin sister, fucky, sucky $2. I gave them the last $5 bill I had and told them I couldn't avail myself of her sister.

DePue: You got there January 11th, so even in Pusan—Pusan's at the very southern tip—was it cold, even in Pusan?

Beechler: Twenty degrees was the wind chill, below zero.

DePue: How did you get up north to the war zone?

Beechler: They had a thing called the Toonerville Trolley. It was an old, wooden-seated train. It had heat, back about two cars. The rest of the cars were… And we had supplies, but there were English on there, too. I scraped up all the C-rations our GIs had and passed them out to the English. I said, "You guys didn't come very well prepared."

He said, "Young man," he said, "let me tell you something. For years, we were empire. We were empire, and we had the soldiers and the war. And we had the battles and places to go all over the world. Now it's your turn. Good luck." (laughs) The British put up some damn good fights up there, though. They were good. There was—

DePue: What was the name of the train that you took north?

Beechler: We called it the Toonerville Trolley. I don't know.

DePue: The Toonerville Trolley. Beechler: Yeah, yeah.

DePue: It had nothing to do with Korea. It was just kind of a derisive name for it, then?

Beechler: Yeah.

DePue: When did you find out what unit you're going to be assigned to?

Beechler: Well, I went to…Just north of Seoul was Yong Dong Po. It's a relocation center for all the military. That's where they sent everybody out from there. We all were shipped out of there, and I was shipped to the Third Infantry Division.

DePue: What specific unit of assignment did you have?

Beechler: I was assigned to the 39th Field Artillery Battalion, 11th Infantry Division.

DePue: The 3rd Infantry Division.

The 3rd Infantry Division. I was with the 39th Field Artillery, with the 3rd Infantry Division.

DePue: Now, from what I understand when we talked earlier, your assignment, once you got there, was as a forward observer, correct?

Beechler: Yes. I was sent to the 39th Field Artillery Battalion.

DePue: Which one of the infantry units did you end up supporting?

Beechler: The 115th.

DePue: The 15th Infantry Regiment?

Beechler: Yeah.

DePue: Do you remember your first day on the front lines?

*Bart Byerschmidt (on the left) and other soldiers take a moment to relax while on the front lines in Korea in April, 1953.*

Beechler: Yeah, Colonel DeBoard took me up and showed me what it was like and everything. He went on and became a colonel in the Army, should have been a general. He's still a good friend of mine, and we correspond together and talk on the phone all the time.

So, then what they is, they sent me…My first assignment was with a South Korean Army fire center. They couldn't speak any goddamn English. I couldn't speak any ROK [Republic of Korea]. I spent three or four days with them. You couldn't tell one from the other. I kept saying, if anybody comes rushing in, if you're firing a gun, I'm going to shoot the son of a bitch. I don't know. I made up my mind. So finally, they sent me back to the firing battery, and I was in charge of lining artillery up and getting the place to fire.

And then, the Greeks didn't have any forward observers. So, for three months, they sent me over to the Greek battalion, and I served as an artillery forward observer for them. I took a wireman and a truck driver. I was assigned two mortars from the infantry. They were all in this bunker with me, and I was in a bunker with an interpreter. I spent three months with them, and I got some pretty heavy action there.

DePue: Was the Greek battalion assigned or attached to the 3rd Infantry Division?

Beechler: Yes, they were. We had the infantry over here, our infantry, and we had Outpost Terry, and I was in the 1st Greek Company. They had three companies.

Colonel Koumanakos [Lt. Colonel George Koumanakos] only came over there once. So, he sent me up there. I couldn't speak Greek, so they gave me this Greek interpreter, who was really good. [He] spoke better English than I did, had been at the University of Athens. I loved this guy, Karallas(??).

They had a lieutenant named Varkos(??), gutsiest son of a bitch I ever met in my life. He loved girls, and he'd done quite a few heroic things, you know. One night we lost three killed, ten wounded. I had a hard time with the captain. He was very proper. He'd sit on the back, and the behind him was a picture of one of my favorite movie stars. I'm trying to think of her now.

DePue: American movie star?

Beechler: American movie star. He was in love with her. I'd told an interpreter to tell their captain that I loved her, also. Then I told him a lot about her. That helped me a lot. Finally, he kept me on this side, very stiff. He never told me the truth of where he was sending his patrols.

I recognized it, immediately, that he wasn't going the right place. So, I called my captain and I said, "This guy's giving me bad news. He's telling me there's no way in the world that they'd have a patrol there." I said, "It's down, right in the middle of the battle zone." So, he looked it up, and he said, "You're right. He's telling you a lie." I said, "What'll I do, sir, I don't want to insult him?" He said, "You'll decorate." He said, "I'll call you every night and tell you. After you've gotten the word from him, you'll have the right information."

So finally, I gave him good whiskey, American whiskey. I gave him other information. Finally, that night, when he lost three killed and ten wounded, and I called in such effective counter battery fire, he brought me around on the other side, sat me down, put his arm around me, give me a good hat, instead of a junky hat, and told me what was really going on, from then on, always. We became very good friends.

I think, the third day up on Greece…Of the three day move up there, he was sent up with them. I wonder if he got killed; I'd sure like to know. He was a good officer. He wanted to come back. He was going to go to infantry school, and he was going to go to Army school for majors, when he came back from Greece. I don't know if he got off of Korea or not.

DePue: What was this officer's name?

Beechler: Yanakuris(??)

DePue: Yana Kuris?

Beechler: Yanakuris.

DePue: That was his last name, Yanakuris.

Beechler: Yeah.

DePue: And his rank, again?

Beechler: Pardon?

DePue: He was a captain?

Beechler: He was a captain.

(phone rings) Hand me my cell phone.

DePue: We've got your phone going on us here.

Beechler: I always wondered what happened to him. I often wondered what happened to—

DePue: We're back here, again.

Beechler: Huh?

DePue: I put it on pause. We're back, recording again.

Beechler: Okay.

DePue: You mentioned you really admired him?

Beechler: Yeah. Varkos was the captain, no Yanakuris was the captain. Koumanakos was the colonel. He only came over to Korea once.

DePue: Is that Varkos with a V or a B?

Beechler: V, Varkos.

DePue: I assume, once you're up there with the Greeks, you get to eat their food?

Beechler: Two times a day, terrible. So I gave my mess sergeant two cans of food I got every day, and he supplied me with American food. The Greeks fed you two meals, fried over hard eggs, so blackened with pepper, you couldn't see the goddamn eggs. Their second meal was lamb, very well prepared and was good. But, after three months of lamb, I can't stand lamb anymore. That's a shame, because all my family likes lamb when we go to those high-classed restaurants, you know.

DePue: Is there anything else you remember that was distinctive about living and being with the Greeks?

Beechler: They had…On the 25th of March was their holiday for getting freedom from the Turks. They fired every weapon they had. They burned out some .30 caliber machine guns, water cooled. (laughs) I know the Chinese must have thought world war three had started, man. What in the world happened?

Then, on April, they had their Easter. They had all these eggs, and you broke eggs and cracked them against each other, until there was just one left. He's the one that won the prize. I loved those Greeks. They were gutsy sons-a-bitches.

DePue: How would you describe their personality or their character traits?

Beechler: Friendly, friendly as hell, stupid, ignorant. They were all country boys, you know what I mean. But they'd fight, not as good as the Turks.

DePue: I was going to say, you mentioned the Turks. Were you close to where the Turks were fighting, as well?

Beechler: Well, they were in the same division with us, but they were on the other side. My job was to keep them away from the Turks, and the other officer's job was to keep them [the Turks] from getting to my people. They'd kill each other.

DePue: Did the Turks even have a reputation among the Greeks?

Beechler: Yes. They were respected. (laughs)

DePue: What was it about the Turks that everybody feared them and respected them?

Beechler: They'd crawl out from the trenches at night, with knives, and slit throats and crawl back in. The next morning, all the Chinese would find was sliced throats. They hated them. They'd put on extra guards.

DePue: So, fearless soldiers, it sounds like.

Beechler: I never went up against the Turks, but I'm kind of glad I didn't.

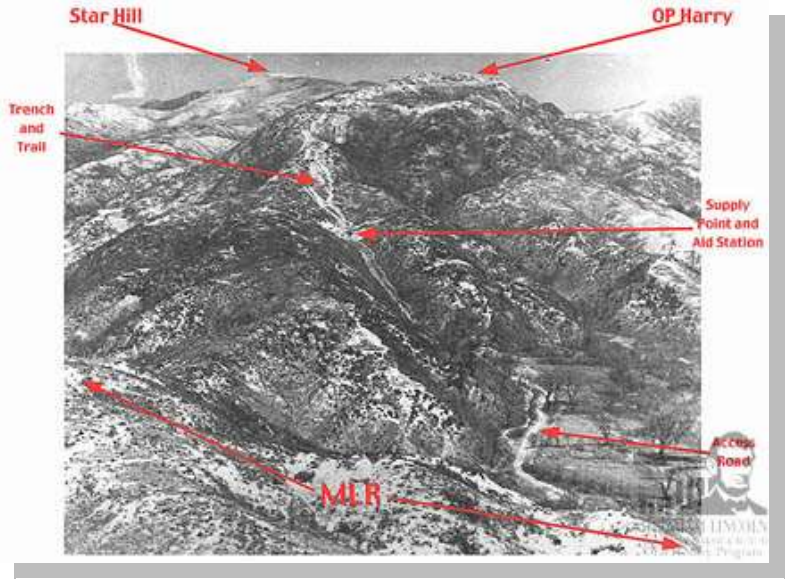
DePue: I want you to describe, as best you can, the terrain where the fighting was going on.

Beechler: Hills, constant hills. You could never stand in any valley and not see a hill. They ran up to around 1,200, 1,400 feet, sometimes a little more. The hill I was on was 1,200 and some feet.

DePue: Was that Outpost Harry or was this—

Beechler: That was Outpost Harry.

DePue: I've got a picture here, I found off of one website. I suspect that will look familiar. It's a very rugged looking ridge line.



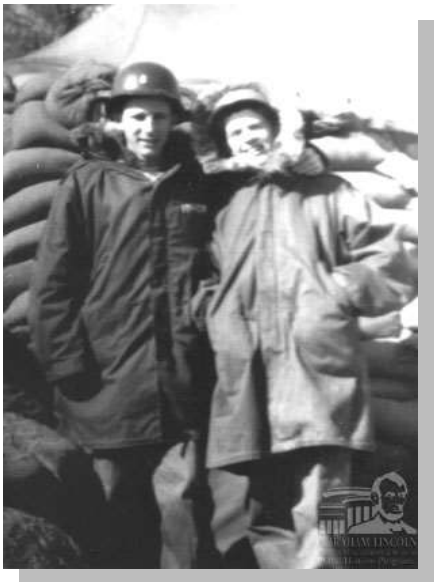

*This photo of the ridgeline leading up to Outpost Harry illustrates the rugged terrain of Korea, and the precarious isolation of positions like Outpost Harry.*

Beechler: That's it. See now, the guy that's head of the Outpost Harry Survivor's Association was a private on this wing, right here. The Chinese couldn't get up this hill; it was too steep. So, they either came up, straight up, or they came from down here. He got wounded and captured. They would cover us on four sides at night, but they never bothered to climb up on the fourth one.

DePue: How much foliage was on those hills?

Beechler: Stubs, stumps, nothing else.

DePue: So they had been—



*John Beechler and Bert Byerschmidt relax in front of their bunker on Outpost Harry in April, 1953. Outpost Harry sat on a dominant terrain feature hundreds of yards in front of the main infantry positions.*

Beechler: Pounded and pounded and pounded. I'm sure I probably dropped hundreds of thousands of shells on them myself, right on the fringe. I asked Bowden(??), I said, "When they come," I said, "I want you to drop shells on me." I said, "Will you?" He said, "Yes, I promise." And he did; three times he did. The only way you can find that out is call Boudin, Byerschmidt, I mean. He claims he did, and [he] was a very honest guy, so religious and believable. I loved that guy. He's probably one of my…if not my best friend, my very best friend.

*1st Lieutenant Anderson (on the right) and another officer stand near their tent, which was on the front lines, a few hundred yards behind Outpost Harry, in April, 1953.*

DePue: John, what I'd like to recommend now, is that we call it a day, because we've been at this for a couple hours now, and then—

Beechler: Come back again?

DePue: …come back again, and we'll really focus, then, on that combat experience you had in Korea, because we probably both would be better off to be a little bit fresh when we get into that subject.

Beechler: I appreciate that, and I appreciate you, sir.

(end of interview #1)

# Interview with John Beechler

# VRK-A-L-2013-026

Interview # 2: May 14, 2013

Interviewer: Mark DePue



DePue: Today is Tuesday, May 14, 2013. My name is Mark DePue. I'm the director of oral history of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, and today I'm in Quincy, Illinois, with 1st Lieutenant John Beechler. How are you this morning?

Beechler: Fine, thank you, more or less.

DePue: I'm sure you'd rather be a lot of other places than here in the Quincy Veterans Home.

Beechler: I'd rather be in your seat and you in mine. (both laugh)

DePue: I'm looking forward, though, to hear, in as much detail as you can recall, what happened, and—

Beechler: Here's what happened. On April the 2nd, we lost an artillery officer, killed on Hill Harry, and a guy went up and replaced him. We lost him on the 10th…No, we lost him on the 12th, the 11th, the 10th, the 10th, the 10th. And then I went up and replaced him. Major Weikert asked me if I'd go up and replace him, and I said, "There's infantry up there, sir." He said, "Yeah, there's infantry." I said, "Aren't we supposed to support infantry?" He said, "Yeah." I said, "Well, why not? That's what we're supposed to do."

So I left my battery area. I left the Greeks and went over to this trail that led up to an outpost area, a very narrow trail on the back side of the hill,

my pack and my carbine, all my equipment, my radio, my recon sergeant, two recon sergeants, filling in the places.

DePue: I wanted to ask you a couple of questions about this. I've got a map of the Kumhwa area. I guess that's how you would pronounce it.

Beechler: Kŭmhwă.

DePue: Kumhwa. And it looks to me like—

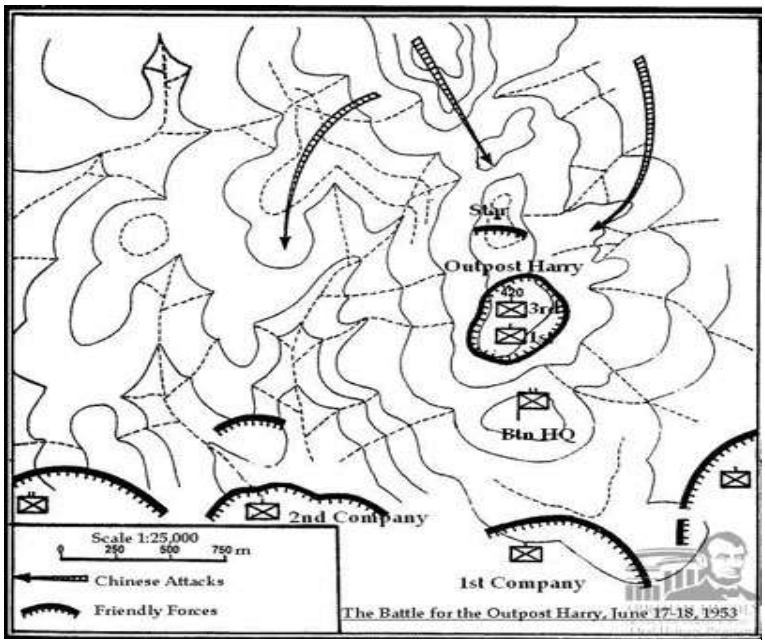
Beechler: Give me my glasses.

DePue: It looks to me like Outpost Harry is actually in front of the friendly lines. Is that right?

Beechler: Four hundred yards.

DePue: Four hundred yards in front of friendly lines.

Beechler: Four hundred yards, yes; we were four hundred yards in front. Star was our nearest enemy, right here. That was the three peaks, and that's where they attacked us from, plus other sides. DePue: I wanted to take some time here and have you explain, basically, the nature of warfare at that time. Let's start with a little bit of detail about what you, as a forward observer, were doing 400 yards in front of the friendly lines.




*The map of Outpost Harry, which clearly shows its distance from friendly lines, and its vulnerability to enemy attack.*

Beechler: Well, I could observe the enemy positions better. I had a big GP [general purpose tent] center. I had a big scope, and I had them under observation at all times, except at night.

DePue: Were you basically up there, you and your small team by yourself, or were there infantry there, as well?

Beechler: No, there was two infantrymen on my left, to protect me, with a 30 caliber machine gun, which didn't work. They got caught up in the whole thing.

DePue: But that's it?

Beechler: That's it.

DePue: So there's less than ten personnel up there.

Beechler: I was closer to the enemy lines than anybody else. It stayed that way until I started back down.

DePue: And the enemy had to know exactly where you were, didn't they?

Beechler: Yes.

DePue: In that area, was that the Chinese?

Beechler: Yes. And they bombed it all the time, mortars.

DePue: Describe, in as much detail as you can, then, the actual position that you had on Outpost Harry.

Beechler: The position I had?

DePue: Yeah.

Beechler: Well, I was in this bunker. It had commo [communication] wire for two beds and three men sleeping in it, with just two beds. They were strung with commo wire. Then we threw our bedrolls down on top of them, to sleep on. One man was always awake, twenty-four hours a day, because they were that close to us.

DePue: What kind of radio did you have?

Beechler: Jesus, I don't remember what it was. It was a standard, big radio.

DePue: FM radio?

Beechler: Yeah, FM, yeah.

DePue: What was the range of the radio, about ten miles or so?

Beechler: Yeah, I think it was about that.

DePue: And how far back was the artillery that you were calling?

Beechler: About six miles back.

DePue: Was that a 105 millimeter gun?

Beechler: One-o-five outfit, yeah.

DePue: Would you have been able to get access to any bigger artillery?

Beechler: Yeah. I got access to 105s, 155s and 180s, 280s.

DePue: Some pretty big stuff, then.

Beechler: Oh, we had some big stuff up there, yeah.

DePue: How about mortars? Were you controlling the mortars?

Beechler: Well, I was in charge of them. I mean, I was in command of their operation. They had to do what I told them to.

DePue: Was that 81 millimeter mortars?

Beechler: Eighty-ones and…What's the other one?

DePue: Four deuce would have probably been at the battalion level.

Beechler: Yeah, that would be back further. We didn't have them; we just had 181s.

DePue: So, the infantry, the main infantry positions are 400 yards behind you?

Beechler: Yeah, the main line of resistance was 400 yards.

DePue: That's got to be a pretty lonely place up there.

Beechler: Very.

DePue: When did you move back and forth between the main line of resistance and the actual outpost itself? Was that at night?

Beechler: I never went back. I was up there twenty-four hours, seven days.

DePue: Was that typical, then, that the—

Beechler: Yeah.

DePue: …the OPs would be manned for that long a time period?

Beechler: Yeah, yeah, until they got all shot up and run over.

DePue: Now, you were a first lieutenant by this time, correct?

Beechler: Yes.

DePue: Did you get promoted when you were actually in Korea?

Beechler: Yes. Captain Patton promoted me. It sounded like I was God's gift to the Army; [he] made me sound so good. And I'd been insubordinate to him several times, too. I didn't like what things were happening up there, you know. And he sure backed me up. Captain King was his name.

DePue: Captain King.

Beechler: Captain was my artillery officer, ordinance superior.

DePue: So, he was the artillery battery commander?

Beechler: No, Board was the battery commander. The fire direction center was First Lieutenant Byerschmidt, Bart Byerschmidt.

DePue: Tell me a little bit about the enemy you faced. You said they were Chinese?

*Bart Byerschmidt stands outside the Fire Direction Center (FDC) tent behind the front lines in South Korea in April, 1953. The 3rd Division occupied the center of the UN lines.*

Beechler: They were Chinese. They had mostly burp guns and mostly wooden hand grenades that looked like a pineapple. They'd throw them. You didn't know if it was going to go off immediately or ten minutes later. They weren't too good.

DePue: Would you describe them as good soldiers?

Beechler: Not particularly, not particularly. They weren't bad, but they weren't good. I mean, they weren't, no. From the fact I encountered all of those and vanquished them made me think they weren't as good as they should have been.

DePue: But they kept coming.

Beechler: They kept coming, coming and coming.

DePue: Were they typically avoiding your position or going right at your position.

Beechler: No, they were going at our position.

DePue: What I'd like to do here, is to have you describe [phone rings]…as soon as your phone stops ringing. Do you need to answer that now?

Beechler: No.

DePue: …to describe, as much as you can, in as much detail as you can, the action of the night, when you were attacked and injured.

Beechler: Okay, I will.

(referring to the phone) Is it still ringing?

DePue: No.

Beechler: Let me call her back and tell her that—

DePue: Let me pause here for a second. Once we're done here—

(pause in recording)

DePue: Okay, John, we're recording again, so if you could describe the battle for us, please.

Beechler: The battle what?

DePue: The combat, that action that night that you were injured.

Beechler: We had eighty-eight men up there on that outpost, six officers and eighty-two enlisted men. We lost nineteen killed, wounded, and we lost sixty-one wounded that lived. I was the worst wounded that lived that night. I got out alright.

My position was on the furthest, north of the hill. When the Chinese hit us, they were there. I mean, that was it. We had them coming over from Three Star [Hill], by the gorge. They came down this little waist-deep trench. They didn't have helmets on, and they didn't have armored vests, so I was able to really raise hell with them, with my artillery fire. I called in VT [variable time] fuse. It was bursting all above the ground, over them. [It] decimated the hell out of them, stopped them several times. They kept coming. When they swept over the hill, they swept right on past me. They didn't blow a charge into my bunker. I don't understand that, to this day, because that cost them a lot of lives.

Anyhow, I went out of the bunker, and I told my recon sergeant, Tillman, I said, "Tillman, the enemy's in the trenches with us." He said, "We can't go out there, sir, the guns, ammunition, fire is still coming in." I said, "Yeah, and they'll be coming in all night, but," I said, "We've got to go out." I pulled him back out of the way, threw him back in behind me, and when I

stepped out, two Chinese soldiers stepped over the bunker, right above. I pulled my trigger, my M-2 carbine, to my waist and fired. My heart skipped a beat. Nothing happened. I had the safety on. So, I ripped the safety off, and I fired sixty rounds into them, all sixty at one time. They all went down. I don't know how many of them…I mean, I know I hit them both, but I don't know if I hit any more than that.

Then I dropped my cartridge out of that and drew a arbor. When I did, their lead key man came back on me. I was fortunate because I had that sergeant…I mean. I not whether he was a sergeant or whatever. Anyhow, I put my chest up to my pistol, and I fired again, the next sixty rounds, because I had sixty, double-double. I don't know how many I fired at him, but he went down, too.

And then, I went running and went to the bunker next to me. There were two men in it. They were just standing there with their heads in their ass. [I] had a 30 caliber machine gun that was supposed to protect me. I said, "What's going on here? Why aren't you firing?" They said, "Our ammunition barrel has been crushed in, and we're not able to fire out of the aperture, sir." So I looked, and it was true. So I said, "Alright, come with me. Get your rifles and come with me."

I started out; I started back down the rear area. I thought our recon sergeant was following me, but I think he probably stayed in the bunker, because he was so damn scared. Anyhow, we got down the hill a little ways, and I came across some fire over us. So, what I did is I pulled a hand grenade out and let the pin fly off, two seconds and threw it up on the hill above me, because there was somebody there firing at me; I don't know who it was. Anyhow, I threw that up there, and I heard that go off. I stepped back in this trench, this bunker trench, and held my carbine. I was ready to fire on them, because I knew that, if I didn't kill them with the hand grenades, that they'd be down on me with the mortar.

So, I heard the explosion and cries and all of a sudden, the Chinese were…I don't know if they come to the bunker or not, but all of a sudden, I was standing there with my carbine, right in the trench, waiting for them to fire on me. I see a little bitty flash, like not even a popcorn, and then a bigger flash, and all of a sudden, I was flying through the air into the bunker.

What happened, I think, is an artillery shell hit the side of the bunker, and that's what got me and blew me back in, back quite a ways. I landed on a water can, next to me.

My left arm was…I knew [it] was wounded already. It blew my carbine out of my hand, so I didn't have any weapon. So this is a little time for thinking here. I knew my left arm was badly injured, and so I reached, with my right arm, over my left knee and run down the leg. There was blood and

grizzle and flesh and blood. I had a compound fracture of the lower tibia on my left leg. I brought my arm up, along my knee, and I got right on the kneecap. There was a big cut there. And I, I'm sorry. I could feel the cut, it was a long slice. I got cut there; another piece of shrapnel had cut open my knee. I didn't know my knee was broken, but it was, at the time. Then I slowly pulled my hand up to my groin. When I did, I had all this mud and blood and, not mud, but blood and soil. I could tell that I was wounded in the groin. I pulled it up further. I didn't know that I'd been wounded in the chest. It penetrated my chest. So, I looked over to my left, and I felt the wound. I tried to feel my chest, and I could feel a hole there. So I put my hand in there and found it had penetrated there. It had penetrated an armored vest, and that saved my life, because I got inside, and there was this wound, but the armored vest had saved my life. So, I was still alive.

I didn't realize my eye was gone. I laid there for a long time. I told the men to be quiet and keep calm, keep cool. I told them a lie. I told them, if you've got religion, pray, because it will save us in the long run. Also, that we had lost this hill back in November, and they took 3,000 men to take it back. And we weren't going to lose it again, because it was a key route to Seoul. So, we were going to hold this hill, because it was a key to Seoul. Then I reached in my right coat pocket. I wanted to get my card out for my girlfriend; I wanted to get that.

(knock at the door) Let me stop for a minute.

DePue: John, this is happening on the evening of the 24th?

Beechler: Around, after 11:00. They hit us at—

DePue: So, it's pitch dark.

Beechler: Pitch dark. I told the men there would be a counterattacking force to take the hill back, so we'd be alright if we could stay alive and keep quiet. This colored boy was moaning and groaning. I said to him, "Look," I said, "If you keep moaning, they'll hear your voice, and they'll throw a satchel charge in here, and we'll all be killed. You need to keep quiet." I took off my helmet and gave it to him. It was a First Lieutenant's helmet, with a bar in the back.

If they'd ever come in here and saw that bar on the back, they'd have tortured him to get the coordinates of our artillery pieces, you know. So he quieted down, and everybody was quiet. I kept reassuring them. I told them that, if they had religion, to pray. I was determined not to pray. I remember the first thing that happened, after I got hit. I was flying back in the air, and I said, "God get me out of here." Then I said, "No, hell no, if there was a God I wouldn't be here." I never prayed anymore for God. I didn't think I needed to. It wasn't going to do any good, whether I'd win or not.

That went on for a couple hours, and finally I heard Lieutenant Mitchell coming up, "Let's go men. Let's take this hill back." I said, "Mitchell, it's friendly artillery. Where are you?" He said, "I'm right here." I said, "Where the hell are you?" He said, "Where have you been? Where's your artillery fire?" I said, "Man, I gave you all kinds of artillery fire." So he stopped at my bunker, got a couple corpsmen up and ordered them to take me back to the rear. I don't know how long this was. It could have been a half hour; it could have been two hours, before they got there.

So, these corpsmen came up, and I said, "Now, whoever is worst wounded, take out of here. I think I am, but I'm not sure." He looked at me, and he said, "Sir, you're the worst wounded that's here, that's alive." And I said, "Okay," I said, "Take me out; put me on that stretcher." They started to pick me up, but I screamed. They said, "Sir, you can't," you know, I had a loud scream. I said, "Look, it's not going to help. I'm hurting; I'll bleed; I was crying, just pick me up and put me on that damn stretcher and take me back. I'm tired. I'm worn out. So, pick me up like a sack of potatoes, and put me on that." And they did. I told them to take the worst wounded out. He said, "Sir, you're obviously the worst wounded of all." There were five or six of us in there. A couple of them were dead. So, they got me out of there, started down the hill.

As we got near the tip of the hill, they were tired, and they set me down to rest. They put me in, over in a bunker cutout for hand grenades. You know what they're like? So, I said to the sergeant, I said, "Sergeant, let's get going." And he said, "I'm tired, sir." I said, "I know you are, but," I said, "I'm tired, too, and I'm dying." I said, "I want you to take me down that hill." So, he picked me up, and we started down the hill. On the way, there was a chink [Chinese] soldier, laying there in a trench. He stopped, put the soldier down and started kicking the soldier in the trench. There wasn't a bloody mark on him. I couldn't see where he'd ever been hit, but he was dead, man. He must have been eighteen, nineteen, maybe less.

About that time, they got me on the stretcher and set me down at the top of the hill, before they started down. Major Semlaub(??) was there to pick me up. He gave them orders and gave me orders and said, "You did a good job, sir." And I thought to myself, how the hell do you know? You weren't up there [to see] whether I did a good job or not. But apparently I had done a good job. So, they started me down the hill. It was a long crawl then, cartridges all over, shells coming in everywhere. Let me stop for a minute.

(pause in the recording)

It was a long drag down that hill, man. It was, I think, about a 175 yards or so. They kept up; they got me down. And when we got down to the bottom of the hill…No, we got halfway down, because they had a half-track up. All I could do was go halfway up on the motor vehicle side of the hill.

You had to get somebody else to pick you up there. So, they put me on top of this half-track. It was crowded, and there wasn't any room, so they put me on top. I said, "Snap me on top that son of a bitch, and let's get out of here." I was on this half-track, and shells were coming in, boom, bang, boom, bang. We kept on going down. They led me down.

Got to the bottom, there was a half-track, one of those two pop hueys [Iroquois helicopters], and there was men there [that] got me off and put me in a helicopter. I saluted them. I was awake. I never did pass out. I kept wondering, man, when am I going to get it?

(interruption, someone enters the room).

DePue: Okay, go ahead.

So, the helicopter flew me back to the aid station. A bunch of guys were in there. I felt safe.

DePue: Had you been directing fire during this attack at all?

Beechler: Well, I called artillery counter-battery fire, yeah.

DePue: From what you mentioned before, you were calling in fire pretty close to your actual position?

Beechler: Right on top of it. I didn't hesitate.

Can you give me something to throw up in?

(pause in interview)

DePue: You wanted to continue here, John?

Beechler: Yes.

DePue: Go ahead.

Beechler: Okay, they took me in the aid stations. There was all kinds of guys laying around. A soldier, a medic, came over to me—You got this?—and started to cut the armored vest off. I said, "Don't cut it off. Take it off. It cost $37." Everybody in the thing laughed. I couldn't understand what the hell they were laughing about, but, you know, that wasn't anything to laugh about. I said, "Save that for another guy." So they took it off of me. Then this corpsmen came up to me and put a needle in me. Pop, I was out. I begged for water, and they said, "We can't give you any water, sir; you're going to surgery."

They must have had a hell of a surgery with me, because the next time I woke up I was at Tokyo Army Hospital, getting ready to evacuate. The

group that was evacuating—it was on the 26th of April—it was Operation Little Switch, so I was on that. I was blindfolded, and I couldn't see what was happening, so I don't remember much. I'd asked them, "What's happening?" And the nurse told me; she said, "We're being evacuated back to Japan for hospitalization. You're going back with all the wounded from the Korean Operation Little Switch." So I knew I was going to make it then.

The next time I woke up…

(nurse interrupts to give an injection)

Then I spent two months in Tokyo Army Hospital. [I] recovered very fast. I was blindfolded for two months and had a nurse named Bennett. She had the sexiest, loveliest voice I ever heard. When they took the blindfold off, she was about as ugly as they come. (laughs)

DePue: You were blindfolded because your eyes had been injured, as well?

Beechler: Well, I lost my right eye, and there was a chance I was going to lose my left eye, and there was a chance I was going to lose my left leg. It was all fast; it didn't take much.

DePue: So you knew you weren't going back to the war.

Beechler: No, I knew…Well, I said to the Colonel there, when he gave me this Purple Heart, I said, "Sir, when am I going back into action?" He said, "Son, you're never going go back to war. You've had it. You give it your all."

DePue: Now, the people in the Operation Little Switch, these are the prisoners of war that the Chinese and the North Koreans had held up to two, two and a half years. Did you have a chance to talk to any of those?

Beechler: No, none of them, no.


Local Soldier Awarded Purple Heart

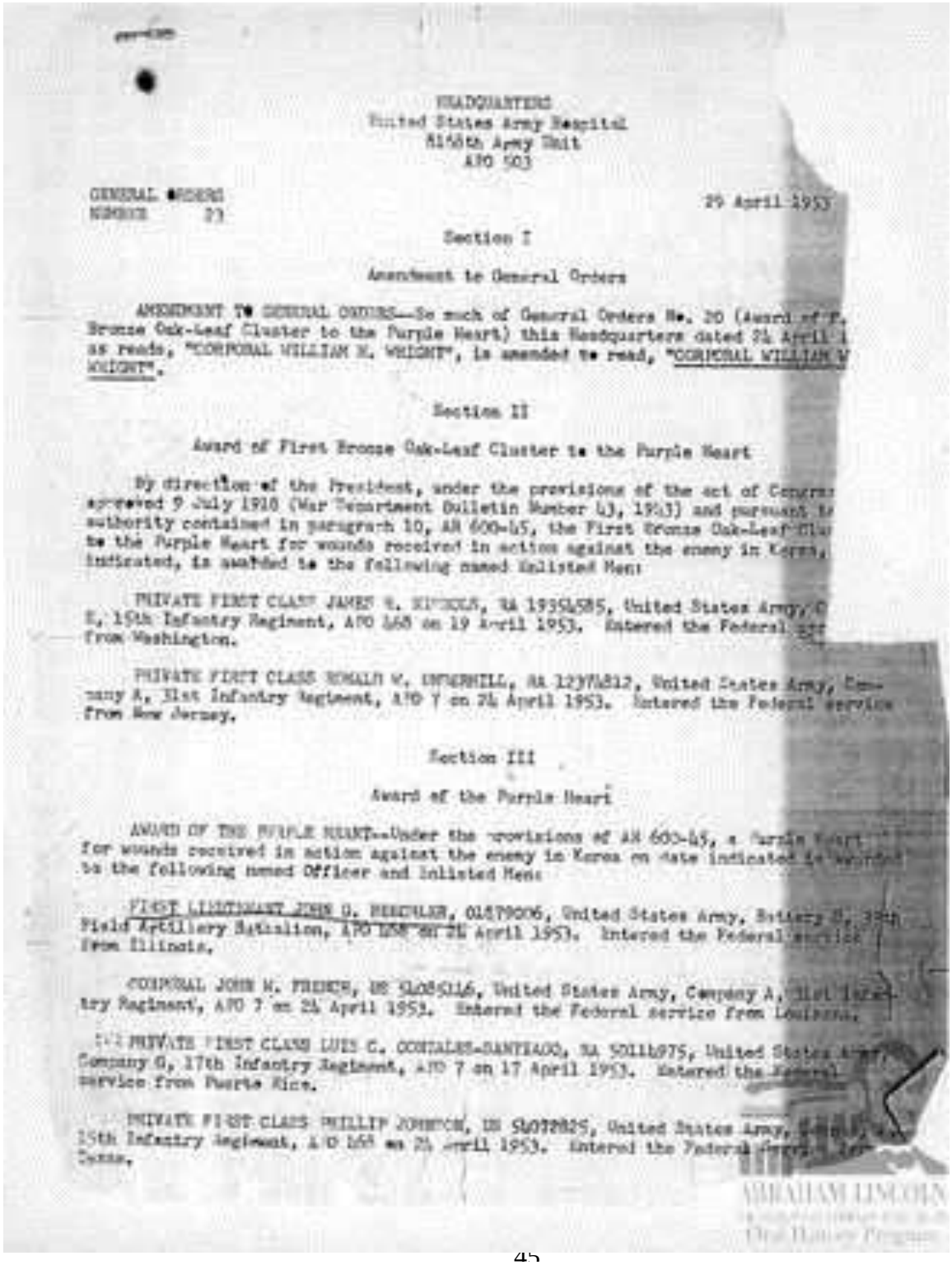
The Purple Heart for wounds received in action in Korea is conferred upon First Lt. John G. Beechler of Springfield, by Colonel Charles L. Kirkpatrick, commanding officer, in a ceremony at the Tokyo Army Hospital. A patient at the hospital, Lieutenant Beechler was a forward observer for the artillery component of the 7th Infantry Division in Korea. Beechler, grandson of Mrs. Anna Dennies, 300½ N. 12th St., s a 1949 graduate of Lanphier High School.

*First Lieutenant John Beechler received a Purple Heart from Colonel Charles Kirkpatrick while he recovered at the Tokyo Army Hospital in mid-1953. Beechler suffered multiple wounds, including the loss of one eye, during hand to hand combat with Chinese attackers at Outpost Harry on the night of April 24, 1953. (Article appeared in the Citizen's Tribune of Springfield, IL.)*

DePue: Where did you go after Japan?

Beechler: From Japan I went to Hawaii—that pink hospital up on a hill—for a week, because I wasn't well enough to travel. And then from the hospital in Hawaii, I went back to Travis Air Force Base.

DePue: And then from there to Brooke Army Hospital?



HEADQUARTERS
United States Army Hospital
8158th Army Unit
APO 503

GENERAL [redacted]
NUMBER 23

29 April 1953

Section I

Amendment to General Orders

AMENDMENT TO GENERAL ORDERS—So much of General Orders No. 20 (Award of P, Bronze Oak-Leaf Cluster to the Purple Heart) this Headquarters dated 24 April 1 as reads, "CORPORAL WILLIAM H. WRIGHT", is amended to read, "CORPORAL WILLIAM W WRIGHT".

Section II

Award of First Bronze Oak-Leaf Cluster to the Purple Heart

By direction of the President, under the provisions of the act of Congress approved 9 July 1918 (War Department Bulletin Number 43, 1943) and pursuant to authority contained in paragraph 10, AR 600-45, the First Bronze Oak-Leaf Clus to the Purple Heart for wounds received in action against the enemy in Korea, indicated, is awarded to the following named Enlisted Men:

PRIVATE FIRST CLASS JAMES E. [redacted], RA 19554585, United States Army, C E, 15th Infantry Regiment, APO 168 on 19 April 1953. Entered the Federal ser from Washington.

PRIVATE FIRST CLASS RONALD W. [redacted], RA 12976812, United States Army, Com pany A, 31st Infantry Regiment, APO 7 on 24 April 1953. Entered the Federal service from New Jersey.

Section III

Award of the Purple Heart

AWARD OF THE PURPLE HEART--Under the provisions of AR 600-45, a Purple Heart for wounds received in action against the enemy in Korea on date indicated is awarded to the following named Officer and Enlisted Men:

FIRST LIEUTENANT JOHN G. BEECHLER, 01579006, United States Army, Battery B, 38th Field Artillery Battalion, APO [redacted] on 24 April 1953. Entered the Federal service from Illinois.

CORPORAL JOHN M. FRENCH, US SL0855116, United States Army, Company A, 31st Infantry Regiment, APO 7 on 24 April 1953. Entered the Federal service from Louisiana.

PRIVATE FIRST CLASS LUIS C. GONZALES-SANTIAGO, RA 50111975, United States Army, Company G, 17th Infantry Regiment, APO 7 on 17 April 1953. Entered the Federal service from Puerto Rico.

PRIVATE FIRST CLASS PHILLIP JOHNSON, US SL0778825, United States Army, [redacted] 15th Infantry Regiment, APO 168 on 24 April 1953. Entered the Federal service from Texas.



*The official military order awarding First Lieutenant John Beechler the Purple Heart for injuries sustained at Outpost Harry, Korea on April 24-25, 1953.*

Beechler: And that's where I stayed for the rest of my military.

DePue: How long were you at Brooke?

Beechler: Up until towards the end of the year, and then they let me go home, permanent change of station to my home address. I was a first lieutenant, working at Pillsbury Mills, going to junior college. [I was] still a lieutenant, until they retired me in the last of March. Then I was a civilian again.

*Major General Martin Griffin awarded 1st LT Beechler with the Silver Star for his actions at Outpost Harry on April 24, 1953. Beechler received the award while recovering from his wounds at Brooke Army Hospital in San Antonio, Texas circa July, 1953.*

DePue: So, that would have been March of '54.

Beechler: I was an absolute retired Army officer at age twenty-four.

DePue: Which is a little bit earlier than you normally would.

Beechler: Yeah.

DePue: I want to find this letter that Major Weikert had written. This was to Miss Wilson. "Dear Miss Wilson…" Who is Miss Wilson?

Beechler: That was my girlfriend at the time.

DePue: Remind us again who Major Weikert is.

Beechler: Major Weikert was a Major in Korea and head of a judge advocate, I think. I mean, he really took care of me and, you know, did the best he could for me. He left $100 in Japan, at the hospital, for them to buy me things, and he'd come over and visit me a couple of times. He was a true friend.

DePue: Was he a staff officer in the unit you were in?

Beechler: He was a staff officer in Korea, and then he became…went back to West Point to teach English. His father had been a general from West Point.

DePue: This is written from Headquarters, Far East Command, chief of staff, 1 May 1953. So this is a—

Beechler: Yeah, he was getting ready to leave for the United States, to come back to the United States.

DePue: I'm not going to read all of it, but this is most of it. It's certainly the relevant parts. He starts off this way [reading]

> *Dear Miss Wilson,*
>
> *I'm an aide-de-camp to the chief of staff, Far East Command—*

That would be a senior, probably a four-star general.

Beechler: Yes, it was.

DePue: Okay.

> *…but have, until two weeks ago, been serving with your friend, John C. Beechler, First Lieutenant, Artillery, in the 39th Artillery Battalion, in the 3rd division in Korea.*

And then, skipping down a couple of paragraphs—

> *I feel you deserve to know that, even before the heroic action in which John received these wounds, he demonstrated himself, at all times, a highly competent and credible officer and man in every way. I myself, as assistant operations officer, was especially fond of him and, as I told him at his embarrassment, considered him **the** red hot lieutenant of all red hot battalions.*
>
> *But his performance in the night of his action, both before his being severely wounded and especially and heroically afterwards, are the kind of things you read about. Please do not worry unduly about him, but rather take comfort that he is receiving the most superb care, both professionally and for his welfare, that is obtainable. But more rewarding still, be assured that he has, by his service, proved himself as fine and gallant an officer as one ever is privileged to meet.*

And its signed Major Weikert.

Beechler: He really liked me. (laughs)

DePue: That's quite a letter.

Beechler: Yeah, it is.

DePue: Now, I wanted to have the Silver Star Certificate here. I don't have that, but I'll get that up on the webpage and include that with the other photographs that we have of you, as well, because I think it's important that people have a chance to read that.

Do you have anything else you'd like to tell us, before we close for today?

Beechler: No, I don't think so. That's about it.

DePue: A couple of questions to close with then, if you don't mind, John. You saw the worst of war and the best and the worst of men, I would assume, during your time in Korea. Do you have any regrets about having served in Korea?

BROOKE PATIENT RECEIVES

SILVER STAR

AWARDED TO 1st LT BEECHLER FOR OUTSTANDING GALLANTRY

First LT John G Beechler, grandson of Mrs Anna Beechler, 3009 N 12th Street, Springfield, Ill, received the Silver Star Medal for outstanding gallantry in action and devotion to duty in Korea.

The award was made by Major General Martin E Griffin, Commanding General of Brooke Army Hospital, where Lt Beechler is still recuperating from the wounds he received in the action that won him the Silver Star last April.

During the night and early morning hours of April 24 and 25, Battery "B" of the 38th Field Artillery was supporting the defensive position of an infantry company of the third Division, near Surang-Ni, Korea, when the enemy attacked. Lt Beechler was forward observer for his unit.

Under heavy barrage, he gave accurate counter - battery fire under orders until his bunker was hit and the enemy gained the trenches. In hand-to-hand combat, he mortally wounded all the enemy who reached his bunker. Despite wounds sustained while saving a fellow - soldier's life, he fought on in his position until the enemy were driven from the hill.

Hospitalized immediately, Lt Beechler was treated in the Far East for two months and then flown to BAH, arriving on June 28th. While he still uses a cane to walk

medical officers at the hospital are pleased with his improvement.

*The Brooke Patient Services (Brooke Army Hospital newspaper) printed this article in 1953 about 1st LT Beechler's heroic actions at Outpost Harry that earned him a Silver Star.*

Beechler: No. I would go again.

DePue: Despite the severe injuries you had.

Beechler: Yeah.

DePue: What was the most memorable experience you think you had? Was it this injury, or is there something else that really has stayed with you, as well?

Beechler: The Chinese were on Three Stars [Hill], and they had a…he must have been a general or something, and I think he was from the Russian Army. He was up there with a briefcase and a… (expressing frustration) Oh, fedudalin. But I knew that terrain so well that, when I made a second round, it went in. So I caught this guy; he was standing up there. I'd seen his body and his briefcase and everything fly up in the air. I killed him. I'm sure he was a Russian officer, shooting at us, but I'm not positive. That kind of thrilled me, because I thought I was striking at the interior there. (laughs)

DePue: How did this experience change you?

Beechler: Well, it made me realize that I had to be disciplined in life. I carried that on in business, and it worked for me very well.

DePue: Any final words or comments for us, John?

Beechler: No, no. I think that's about it.

DePue: I thank you for giving me the opportunity to do this. I know that it was not necessarily easy for you to do this, but I think it's important that we preserve this for the future, because not many people have had the kind of experiences you had. It's a pleasure for me and a privilege to have the chance to meet you and talk to you.

Beechler: I appreciate you. I like you very much, and I appreciate your service for the country.

DePue: Thank you, John.

(end of interview #2)