Interview with Richard Bowen

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Interviewer: Mark DePue

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DePue: Today is Wednesday, March 3, 2010. My name is Mark DePue; I'm the director of oral history with the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. And I'm here this morning with Richard Bowen. Good morning, Rich.

Bowen: Good morning, Mark.

DePue: We are here with Rich because you have some very interesting stories to tell about your experiences during the Vietnam War, but the part that fascinates me, and I think it's worthy of us recording, is you didn't go to Vietnam, you went to Germany instead. So you're going to give us a perspective of what was going on during the war from a perspective of the Army in Germany. But you've also got a very compelling story growing up in Southern Illinois. Part of that is because you're an African-American, so you've got a little bit different perspective of that as well.

Bowen: That was my basic training.

DePue: Yeah, there you go. (Bowen laughs) So let's start with when and where you were born, Rich.

Bowen: I was born in Colp, Illinois—C-o-l-p—(laughs) which is quite unusual, the pronunciation of the name. Very small place, and at one time it was on the map, but I don't think it's carried on very few maps anymore.

DePue: Well, I did manage to find it on the map, but it's just a spot on the map, isn't it?

Bowen: Yeah. Yes, (laughs) it is.

DePue: Well, tell us in relation to other places where Colp would be.

Bowen: We are located approximately three miles west of Herrin—H-e-r-r-i-n—Illinois, and approximately thirteen miles north and east of Carbondale off of Route Thirteen.

DePue: How big a town was Colp when you were growing up?

Bowen: My guess is between four to five hundred people, and I'm just not quite sure, but I think it's pretty close to that, and I think now it's probably approaching around 350—what the sign says, if we can believe the sign. (laughs)

DePue: How did your family end up in Colp? You know that story?

Bowen: I've heard rumors. (laughter) I think on both sides of the family, they ended up coming to that area to work, and my dad's side came out of Kentucky, and I think Hopkinsville, Kentucky.

DePue: Was that after the Civil War?

Bowen: After the Civil War. And I think for the most part it was right around the turn of the century, probably around 1900, 1910, somewhere in that [period]. It's probably what I [would] have to guess.

DePue: What would bring a black family to Colp at that timeframe?

Bowen: It was the lure of a good-paying job to support the family. And that's how my grandfather on my dad's side ended up coming. Then my mother's people came from Tennessee. All of them, for the most part, worked the coal mine, and that's what got them there. The town of Colp was developed by, for the most part, Madison Coal Company, and they owned the mineral rights for that area as well as on a lot of the property out there. They built the community, the homes, laid out the streets, and that's where most of the workers lived in that area, in Madison Coal Company homes that they had built.

DePue: So this was a company town.

Bowen: Company town. They had a company store. They paid in scrip, which meant that your money wasn't too expendable outside of the community. I don't think anybody complained about the products and services that they received, just that it was sort of a closed place in terms of where you could actually work, live, and also spend your money.

DePue: What was the ratio on the ethnic background of Colp in those days?

Bowen: The town itself—and I don't know how some of this stuff came to be—but when I grew up, they called the town Colp, which was the village, and then they also had what you called the camp, which was basically—it didn't have paved streets, and you could just tell by the looks. The houses were different in one part of town than the other. And so in terms of the camp, it was primarily African-American. In terms of the village, it was pretty well integrated with both blacks [and] whites. They had the white school in the village of Colp, and the black school was in the camp. And basically camp is also referred to by a lot of people during this timeframe as Number Nine, which is the Number Nine mineshaft. Again, I was probably a teenager before I made that distinction, (laughter) that Number Nine was actually just a hole in the ground. (laughs) And so Number Nine is what they referred to as the camp area where people lived and worked.

DePue: If you were to put a percentage when you were growing up, white versus black, what would it be?

Bowen: In Number Nine, it was probably 90 percent African-American. I mean, looking at the village of Colp, it had a mayor that runs the city and the camp; there was basically no government except that informal relationship(??). There was in the village of Colp probably fifty-fifty, and a lot of those whites were Italians, some Irish, as I remember, as I got older. Before that, the different nationalities didn't—

DePue: You probably weren't paying much attention.

Bowen: Wasn't paying any attention at all to that.

DePue: Okay. Well, let's go talk a little bit about your father—and first of all, when you were born again, your birthday?

Bowen: Nineteen forty-two, April the twentieth. Born in the back bedroom of my grandmother's house.

DePue: That's a war year. What was your father doing at the time?

Bowen: Dad had put his age up and went into the military.

DePue: He had "put his age up"?

Bowen: Yeah. I guess back in those days, it might have been fairly easy for someone to say that their age was actually maybe eighteen when in fact it may have been sixteen. And I never really paid much attention to that until I think Dad made some kind of remark about how old he was, and I noticed it didn't agree with his military records. (laughs)

DePue: Do you know if his parents, if your grandmother signed a paper saying that her son could go into the military?

Bowen: His was kind of [an] unusual case because his mom died when he was like five or six years old, I think in childbirth, and his dad died when he was like maybe fifteen, and so he wandered, or I guess his oldest sister was help taking care of him. I think he must have realized that, hey, this is not going anyplace. Everybody's going in the war; I might as well try that too. So he decided to get into the military and put his age up in order to get that job accomplished. And so at that point in time, his father had died, and his mother had died much earlier.

DePue: Mm-hmm. Well, were your parents married, then, when you were born?

Bowen: No.

DePue: Okay. He was already off to service when you were born, then, I take it?

Bowen: You know, I haven't done the math on that one. (laughs) I do remember him coming back from service, because I have no recollection of him prior to that time period. I got a feeling that I may have been born or either it was shortly after I was born that he put his age up, went into the military.

DePue: Okay. What did he do in the military? Was he in the Army?

Bowen: In the Army. You know, I think he was just infantry. I never really heard him talk too much about specific kinds of jobs except for the—and he didn't talk too much about what he—he was in seven combat battles, and so I think he saw too much of that and he didn't really talk a lot about it at all.

DePue: Do you know if he went to Europe or to the Pacific, then?

Bowen: Yeah, he was in Europe. I remember him talking that he had seen Patton and his pearl-handle guns. (laughter) And he also spent some time, I think, in South Africa. And I don't remember the city or location.

DePue: You mean North Africa.

Bowen: North Africa, I'm sorry. North Africa. North Africa, I'm sorry. And he also evidently spent a lot of time in Europe when it was cold, because I just remember him talking about how cold it was and how they would give him a bale of hay, and you had to sleep on it and cover up with it. (laughs) And he also had the effects of frostbite on his ears, and his ears were kind of ruffled up there on the… And I was trying to figure out, "Dad, were your ears—were you born like that?" And he said, (laughs) "No, I wasn't," and he kind of explained how he got those curly ears because of that.

DePue: But otherwise he didn't talk about the war much.

Bowen: No, he didn't.

DePue: And that was typical of that generation.

Bowen: And I kind of regret that I didn't try a little harder (laughs) to get some information out of him.

DePue: What was his name?

Bowen: Richard Bowen, B-o-w-e-n.

DePue: So you're Richard Junior?

Bowen: Yes.

DePue: Okay. What did he do when he returned home, then?

Bowen: Oh, boy. When he returned home, he struggled trying to find jobs, and I think he worked—I know he ended up leaving because he couldn't find employment in the area and working in East Moline, Illinois, as a foundry worker for GI [*sic*] Case [J I Case?] and maybe possibly International Harvester.

DePue: But somewhere along the process he headed back down to Colp again, I would think.

Bowen: Yeah. See, I started the first grade in East Moline, Illinois, and that's where he was working there, in the foundry. He went from there back to Colp and sort of—I think he did sort of odd jobs there during that time period and eventually ended up leaving, going to Danville, Illinois, to work in a foundry for General Motors. And my daddy passed before I could ask him this question, ended up asking Mom instead. When Dad went to go to work in East Moline, Illinois, he had his uniform on, and I didn't think to ask why did he have his uniform on, because he wasn't in the military at that point in time. And I ended up asking Mom later, and she said that was basically the guarantee that he could get a seat on the train, because other than that, he'd probably have to stand up all the way and end up in a smoke car or something like that instead. So he put his uniform on.

DePue: Do you know when the family moved back to Colp, then? Roughly.

Bowen: I did not move to Danville when he went to Danville. I stayed in school with my grandmother and bounced between my grandmother and my favorite aunt, Aunt Bea, which is Beatrice, Cherry was her name. She didn't have any kids, but it was like having a second grandmother.

DePue: That was back in Colp?

Bowen: In Colp, yeah.

DePue: Okay. I'm assuming here that your parents got married sometime shortly after he got back from the war?

Bowen: Yes, yeah. Yes, that happened.

DePue: Okay. Tell me a little bit more about your mother, then.

Bowen: Mom—

DePue: What was her name?

Bowen: Helen.

DePue: Helen Cherry?

Bowen: No, Helen Vaughn, V-a-u-g-h-n. Helen V. or Varied was her middle name, but she didn't like for you to use that name. (laughs)

DePue: You knew better than to do that, huh?

Bowen: Right. I probably tried it one time too many. (laughter) And her dad also was a coal miner, and he ended up leaving Colp going to West Virginia to work the coal mines. Evidently the coal mines must have sort of played out about that time here. I remember being about six years old going to visit my grandfather out in West Virginia, taking this long train ride and seeing all kind of exciting things for a six-year-old to look out the train window and look at, and who had been raised in Colp with a very limited amount of sights to see. (laughs)

DePue: Yeah, a lot of flat terrain, I would think, down in Colp.

Bowen: Yeah, flat terrain, and very little commercial buildings that would amount to anything. Matter of fact, probably only two or three two-story buildings, (laughs) but most of that was just two-story houses.

DePue: Well, I know that you mentioned in our pre-interview that your mother was the school superintendent for the local schools.

Bowen: No, not my mom. My mother-in-law was the secretary of the school board during the 1952, '3, prior to that time period when *Brown v. Board of Education* [was decided][1]. And she took pretty good notes, and after she

[1] Brown V. Board of Education of Topeka, 347 U.S. 483 (1954). Segregation of white and Negro children in the public schools of a State solely on the basis of race, pursuant to state laws permitting or requiring such segregation, denies to Negro children the equal protection of the laws guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment -- even though the physical facilities and other "tangible" factors of white and Negro schools may be equal. Cornell University Law School, Legal Information Institute, http://www.law.cornell.edu/supct/html/historics/USSC_CR_0347_0483_ZS.html (accessed March 12, 2012).

passed away, my wife didn't waste much time throwing all that stuff away. (laughs)

DePue: Oh. Well, tell me what it was like growing up in Colp during the 1950s.

Bowen: Well, it was probably some of the best of times, and you didn't know it. And led a very sheltered life, and I didn't know it. We were able to move very freely around the community. It wasn't like parents had to watch us, like you do today. When you left the house, you just said, "Hey, I'm going up to so-and-so's house to play," and typically we played out in the street or in a field that was close by. And in some cases, we even went in the woods for our entertainment, you know, to chase birds or squirrels or rabbits or something, and sort of enjoyed our day doing those kinds of things, discovering nature. (laughs)

DePue: Was the family religious?

Bowen: That was always a part of the background. (pause) If you didn't go to Sunday School or church on Sunday, you couldn't leave the yard (laughter) for that Sunday. So you just learned very quickly that you might as well get up and go to Sunday School or church because if not, it's going to be a long day on Sunday, (laughs) and you could see everybody else playing and you couldn't. So that's been a part of my life, my grandmother was an usher at church a lot, and then my mother, later on, played the piano for the church.

DePue: What was the church?

Bowen: Mount Olive Baptist Church.

DePue: Was this a Baptist church?

Bowen: This is a Baptist church. There was probably six or even seven churches in town when I was growing up.

DePue: For a town of some three hundred people?

Bowen: Yes, yes. And there was probably an equal amount of taverns. (laughs) And so you had the churches and you had taverns, and you belonged to one of those groups. (laughter)

DePue: Or maybe both, huh?

Bowen: Yes, in most cases, probably both.

DePue: Well, I know that eventually your father's going to be running one of those taverns, is that right?

Bowen: Yes. Eventually, that's what happened. I think it had to happen during the recession in the fifties, probably late fifties, I believe, when he ended up getting laid off at General Motors in Danville, and he decided to come back home and give it a try running this tavern and restaurant. I remember that taking place. I was maybe a junior, senior—probably a junior in high school when this was taking place.

DePue: Do you have some other brothers and sisters?

Bowen: Yes, I do. I have two brothers and two sisters. The next-oldest is Yvonne, and we're eleven years apart. And I always kid my mom and dad—you know, they fooled me, made me think I was going to be an only child, and then here comes my other siblings along the way. And they're all probably about two years apart, so they're real close to each other in age and also close to each other in terms of personality and temperament and all of that, and I kind of appeared to them like another pseudo–authority figure for them. Even to this day, there's things that happened that I didn't know about (laughter) that now they're finally getting around to telling me some of those things that they kept from me as well. But the four of them kind of stood pretty close to each other in terms of when they got in trouble or were doing some things.

DePue: Do you recall when you first realized, Hey, I'm different from some other people on the other side of Colp here, or the first incident of discrimination?

Bowen: (pause) You know, for me, it wasn't like a clear signal that this is when this all started; it's kind of blurry lines. I began to hear signals like, "Don't go there, Stay away from here, Watch out for this, Watch out for that". And of course, when you're young and innocent, you don't think about those kinds of things. It's the farthest thing on your mind, whereas your parents are thinking about these kind of things. This is a point where things are very, very segregated. You know, the schools were segregated, of course the churches are segregated, and the community was segregated. But there was interaction there with the young people, and to this day, I don't remember any of us young people having any problems.

DePue: But you went to a black school when you were in grade—

Bowen: Yeah, went to a black school. And what was so odd—the white school was on the same block that I lived, and I had to go several other blocks in another direction in order for me to go to the black segregated school. I could look out my window and see the white school. Of course, we just weren't old enough to question it—just the way it was, and this is what we did.

DePue: Could you tell, was there any significant difference in terms of the building between the white and the black school?

Bowen: Sure. (laughter) It was different. And I think the one thing that might have been different—I think they may have started off pretty equal, because my

understanding from my mom was that the black school ended up having an accident and a fire burned it down. So that made it different, but at one time, I think both buildings were built about the same time and also built from the same plan, so they kind of, I'm sure, looked alike; different locations.

DePue: Were your teachers African-American?

Bowen: Our teachers were African-American, and the principal of the school most of the time when I was there in grade school—this is grade one through eight—and she had been a teacher for my mom as well as my dad. That was Mrs. Carter, Emma Carter. She had quite a bit of respect. (laughter)

DePue: She was not to be messed with, I take it.

Bowen: That's true. (laughs)

DePue: What do you think about the quality of education you got in grade school?

Bowen: One thing about education, you don't know what you need until you get out in the world and realize that you either are deficient or prepared. I think to a great extent, I was prepared, probably from the fact that the seed was planted that I needed to work on certain things. I think we had a pretty good education, the foundation. We didn't have a lot of frills and signs and those kind of things, but we did have a basic—they called it, what, the four R's—reading, writing, 'rithmetic, and whatever was that other one—rhetoric, I think was… But the one thing that was there that was different for us that I know had to have been from the white school is that we had teachers who, for the most part, had been trained at probably predominant black schools, and I know that we weren't getting any information about blacks. So we would have to prepare a black history scrapbook once a year, and that is what drew our attention to black things, black people, what they were attributed to. Because the textbooks didn't address those kind of issues. Not only then, but also even today, a lot of textbooks in schools still don't address that part of our history.

DePue: Well, if my timeline is right, about the time you got into high school is about the time that the civil rights movement in the United States really started to hit as well.

Bowen: Yes, that's when it started.

DePue: Where did you go to high school?

Bowen: Went to high school in Herrin, Illinois. That's H-e-r-r-i-n.

DePue: Was that an integrated school?

Bowen: That made it integ… (laughs) When they did that, that integrated the schools. Prior to that time, there [was the] black high school, and you also had a white high school—the white high school was in Herrin. [When] the white kids graduated, [they] caught the yellow bus and went to Herrin to high school, and if you were black and you graduated from grade school, you went to the black school which was there in Colp. It was very, very limited in terms of what it had to offer. The facilities weren't that large and you didn't have that many kids, so you couldn't afford to have a teacher for all these different subjects the person needed. In talking with my mother-in-law about some of the discussions they had during this time period, what happens once they integrate the schools—they knew that their kids in that community needed training to be prepared to go to the world of work and get good jobs and prepare themselves for the world, but they knew that their high school was deficient. It wasn't anything against the teachers; it's just that they got hand-me-down books, they didn't get microscopes, and they didn't get chemical sets to do the projects. So they were going to get left behind in terms of the kind of jobs [available to them]. They were going to be ill-prepared for [good jobs]. Of course, back in this time period, a high school diploma brought you an awful lot of attention in the workforce. So it was very critical. I think in a lot of cases, even in this timeframe, a person could probably get a certificate to teach if they finished high school. It was kind of fading away, but there were some cases where that was some of the exception.

DePue: What was the year, then—do you remember?—when Herrin integrated the schools?

Bowen: I believe it was probably 1954.

DePue: Okay, well, that would have been the year *Brown v. Board of Education [*was decided]. And 1957, of course, was the year that you have the Little Rock integration case that blew up into a major incident.

Bowen: So it might have been '55 or '56, because when I graduated from grade school, I entered the high school, and it had already been integrated

DePue: So you weren't the first year of integration.

Bowen: I wasn't the first year. I graduated in 1960, so it would have been 1956 is when I would have gone there. That was when it was still fairly new to be there at the high school.

DePue: Did they have any African-American teachers at the school by that time?

Bowen: No, and that was one of the things that my mother-in-law pointed out was one of the hesitations about having us going to an integrated school. We knew it was going to be a better school for the kids, but what was going to happen to their friends who taught school, and of course principals, janitors, and the other kind of jobs related to the school system? When they were trying to

negotiate, work out all the bugs for the transition, they would say, "Well, we'll see. It might happen, but let's take care of the kids first." And it never happened for the black professionals; they had to leave the community. I remember when they would leave our church and say that they left to go to some northern city. Most of them, to my understanding, did well and eventually became superintendents and principals and other pretty good positions in education once they left the community.

But they never did have anybody of color teaching at the school system [during] the four years I was there, and my understanding is since then they've had some substitution with teachers. I have a cousin now who is teaching at the high school, who is a U of I graduate and [has] quite a background, I think, in project management. So she's probably only back home because she had a divorce and a kid and wanted to be around her mom and dad, and that's the reason why they ended up able to have somebody of that caliber teaching in the schools. Other than that, I don't think she would have had that much interest in teaching there.

DePue: What was it like as far as getting along with the kids in school? Was there tension?

Bowen: You know, I never felt it, that kind of tension. Yeah, there was always one or two kids trying something, call you a name or play a joke or prank on you, but that would have happened if I was at a black school. (laughs) And I think the other thing is I probably was able to see something different than some of my other high school friends, and that's because I played sports all year round and just about all season, so I caught the bus in with the rest of the kids, but I didn't catch the bus back home because I was playing some sport—football, basketball, track, wrestling. So I was just seeing things differently.

DePue: Do you think because you were playing sports that might have eased the transition for you personally, made the white kids accept you more?

Bowen: I believe it did, and the reason why I say that, because if you look at my yearbook,—I haven't done the math in a long time, but you probably would find maybe five, six people of color out of 240, 250 kids total in the class. I was elected secretary of my sophomore class and vice president of my senior class, and I sure didn't do it on people of color votes. (laughter) I think it had more to do with the fact that I was out for sports, and that probably gave me a lot more name recognition, as I look back over it. I was also encouraged by—I don't know what people saw in me enough to ask me to make sure I ran for office.

DePue: Okay. Were you, paying much attention to what was going on in the civil rights movement? I mentioned that Little Rock desegregation was going in 1957. That certainly got a lot of national press.

Bowen: It did. Having been raised during this time period of my life, my eyes began to open up to some of this when I was in the house with my grandmother.

DePue: They had TV?

Bowen: (pause) Grandmother, no. We had radio and newspaper. She usually found some reason to give me a lesson about something that was going on in the newspaper. She was pretty well-read—at least I felt that way, anyway. (laughs) She tells me she just had an eighth-grade education. But I just didn't feel that way in terms of what she was able to do for me.

DePue: Well, certainly when she was growing up, that wasn't uncommon at all.

Bowen: Yeah. And pretty feisty grandmother. (laughs)

DePue: Okay. You've already talked quite a bit about growing up in high school. I know when we were talking before, you mentioned an incident about the principal grabbing a man in school?

Bowen: This was grade school. This is a segregated school. I remember one day, we observed the principal with somebody we later found out was a book salesman. He had him by the collar and he was pushing him towards the door to put him out of the building. Of course we were old enough to realize that this could be trouble. (laughs)

DePue: Because…?

Bowen: Because he's putting a white man out of our building, and that there may be some trouble because of that. So that's what was whispered around. We later find out why he was doing that, because the salesman was insisting that he take this book order that had—I think it was a book on history—that had "Negro" in lower case. The principle felt it was an insult, and he wasn't going to expose his kids to this kind of a book that didn't treat them with respect. He tried to point that out to the guy, but the guy didn't want to accept that, and he wanted his books adopted, so the principle just escorted him to the door. That's the story I got later in terms of what happened. I since have looked at books printed during that time period. It was very common that "Negro" was spelled in lower case and "White" with a capital *W*. (laughs)

DePue: Okay. But apparently he didn't get any repercussions, at least not that you knew of.

Bowen: No, none to my knowledge. Now, maybe the guy may have called the school board or called a school board member—I don't know if that ever happened or not—but as far as I know, there was no repercussions at all from that incident.

DePue: Okay. Obviously, once you get to high school, (pause) your world is a little bit bigger than Colp. It's now Herrin and Colp, but I would assume that you're also getting around to these other towns as well. You're playing sports, so you're going to a lot of other towns.

Bowen: Yes.

DePue: Anything in that respect that you encountered?

Bowen: Yeah. During that time period, Herrin High School was a pretty good sports team, and we beat a lot of teams that we played. (laughs) And now—

DePue: Well, let's—I'm going to be very specific here. In football, what was your position?

Bowen: In football, I was an end, and I was pretty good, and as a result, I played both offensive and defensive. I was the only person of color on the team, so as a result of that, when I tackled a lot of people from the opponents [team] (laughter) or caught passes, I'd get called some names. Usually by the time we got on the bus, somebody would hit the bus with a rock or an apple or something.

DePue: Yeah. Well, what names were they calling you, Rich?

Bowen: (laughs) They would call—well, called me the n-word, and they would do that quite often. I wasn't so concerned about (coughs) that as much as—one of the things I always did—I never—when the game was over, like most people do, pull your helmet off and walk to the bus. No, I kept my helmet on because I knew somebody was going to probably try to throw something at me. And they did. Fortunately I never was hit, but they did throw things, and there was things that did hit the bus, stuff like that.

DePue: What did your other teammates do about it? How did they react?

Bowen: Nothing was too much said. People were just very quiet about it. I don't think they liked it, but they didn't know what to do about it either, what to say either. They always treated me with respect. The one incident that happened there in Herrin—I think the one you might be looking for—is one day at practice, outside the hurricane fence, about three or four kids just stood outside the fence and just called me all kinds of nigger names and just made all kinds of disparaging remarks. At this point, I'm thinking, "When practice is over, I have to walk from high school down to the corner to hitchhike a ride home—am I going to be safe?" And I didn't realize at the time what my coach was doing. I notice he didn't say anything to me; I didn't see him saying that much to anybody else. But what I found out later what he was doing, he was asking different players, "Do you know these kids? Who are they?" And evidently, he figured out who it was, because it only happened once. And I'm sure that he played a part in making that go away. His name was Les

McCullen, and he later became—I believe it was the superintendent of the schools and also became the regional superintendent of education. He was a football coach, PE teacher, and someone I think was very, very fair and understood those kinds of things, and he didn't really take any guff from too many people.

DePue: How did you feel about that kind of treatment, and how did you deal with it?

Bowen: I'm not sure if I dealt with it, you know, the way I probably should have. I internalized it. I didn't even tell my parents about it at the time because I figured if I told them, I couldn't play; they would take me off the team. So I didn't tell them. I might have mentioned it to my cousin or something like that, but I didn't cry about it; I just went ahead and played. (laughs)

DePue: What position did you play in basketball?

Bowen: I played the forward in basketball, and I guess you'd consider maybe I was not a starter, maybe a sixth man, something like that. But football was my best sport, and I ended up being an all-state football player.

DePue: I was going to say. You were a little bit modest before. You said, "I was pretty good," but being an all-state player means that you're a little bit better than "pretty good."

Bowen: Well, yeah, I guess so. (laughter) I guess for the time period, and I think when you look back, you just figured, hey, you were doing your best, and you just don't measure up against other things and other people until later in life. But—

DePue: Did you draw any attention from college scouts?

Bowen: I did. I can't even remember where they were from now at this point, but somehow I think I made the right decision, that I probably could have got a scholarship, but I knew that in order to play college football that I'd have to practice probably twice a day, and I know that's what the general practice was during that time at SIU. When I played high school ball and practiced one time a day, it took all the energy out of me. (laughs) I knew by the time I got home, I put a book in my hand, I was kind of exhausted and fell asleep (laughs) easy—a good sedative. And I knew that when I went college, the important thing is get a degree, so I didn't figure I could do both, and so I just decided to stay with the academics when I did go to college.

DePue: When you had some free time, did you go to other towns and check out some other places around the neighborhood?

Bowen: Yeah. When I had some free time, got to be a teenager, and some of the kids began to start driving cars, we could get into cars and go visit the young ladies in other cities or watch other sporting events in other towns. Because not only

did Colp have a small number of African-Americans, you also had some of these other surrounding communities also had a small number of African-Americans as well—you know, DuQuoin, Carbondale, Harrisburg…

DePue: Were there some places that you had to be more careful when you went in there?

Bowen: There were some places that today we call them the sundown towns, but during that time period, we knew there were certain towns, like Carterville, which was three miles south of Colp—this is one of the towns or cities that my parents would tell you, Don't get caught there after dark. Make sure you get out of there before it gets dark. (laughs) If your car breaks down, just leave it; come on home. (laughs) If you have a flat, just drive it anyway. So there was some fear put into us that I don't know rationally if it was so or if it was the right thing to instill in us—because in other words, if we had trouble there, it was probably not going to be interpreted correctly and it might end up in pretty bad results for us if we decided to stay and probably challenge some things. Because teenagers at that time normally don't have good judgment (DePue laughs) about how to get themselves out of situations.

DePue: What did you think you wanted to do with your life when you're getting close to finishing high school?

Bowen: You know, my horizon was not that broad. I wanted to do one of two things: work the coal mine or work in a foundry. And of course in high school, my dad tells me, "Son, you can't work the coal mine; you can't work the foundry. I'm not going to let you do that." Because he didn't think that was fitting work for me. He never worked a coal mine, but his dad worked a coal mine. But he talked in terms of that it was not a place for me. So I really didn't have a lot of options.

DePue: Well, the military.

Bowen: Yeah. And then my mom was saying, "Do you really want to do that?" (laughs) So she's putting down on me whether or not I should go in the military. So that was probably one of my best choices because that was where a lot of my high school friends were going, into the military, and—

DePue: And this was the time during the draft, of course.

Bowen: This is during the draft. The kids in my community who graduated from high school, if they stayed around in Colp and that area, they ended up getting drafted, and very soon. Now, those kids who left after graduation to go to larger cities—you know, Chicago; Detroit; Dayton; Toledo, Ohio; and some of those places—California, New York—the people who left to go to those places did not get drafted—not right away. But the kids who stayed around got drafted right away.

DePue: And this is 1960, right?

Bowen: Yeah, this is '60.

DePue: So where did you end up?

Bowen: I ended up with a fellow about three doors down from us, who was a deacon in our church, had brought a scholarship by for my mom and for me to look at and told me that I should apply for it, and I did. And in hindsight, he was sitting there in a position to make sure that I got it. (laughs)

DePue: What was his name?

Bowen: Maliki Duncan. And he was very, very instrumental in the church. Mr. Duncan is what we kids all called him. And found out that Mr. Duncan was one of the people who first came to town during the time period that they were selling the community. He—

DePue: Selling the community? The mining company was…?

Bowen: Well, right. When the mining company was developing the company, he was one of the first wave of people that came through. He was a religious man, and he and another fellow by the name of Dan McNeal boarded in the same house. I think they must have had rooms there or something like that. At that point in time, my understanding is there was no church in town for African-Americans. They were meeting at somebody's house and decided that we need to build churches. One of the individuals was Methodist, and Mr. Duncan was Baptist, and they flipped coins as to which church they would build first. They were going to help each other build churches, to build the physical building.

DePue: Now, you say this other person was Methodist. Is that the…?

Bowen: African-American.

DePue: Methodist.

Bowen: AME? Yeah.

DePue: I think it's African-American or Methodist Episcopalian or something in there? [African Methodist Episcopal Church]

Bowen: Yeah.

DePue: That always confused me. But anyway, I'm sorry.

Bowen: But Dan McNeal won the coin flip, and so the Methodist church got built first. I never knew that as a kid growing up. After I got out of college, I ended up

having a discussion with somebody and found that little trivia of information. We went to the Baptist church, and in hindsight, I knew Mr. Duncan was really special as related to the church. I think I can see the connection now, because he was part of building the church. He was instrumental in getting me what's called I think, a Mt Olive District Baptist Church Scholarship for five hundred dollars. That went a long ways towards getting me started, because had that not taken place, I probably would have volunteered and went to the Air Force.

DePue: What was the school you went to?

Bowen: SIU Carbondale. But more specific, it was VTI, which was vocational technical training [Vocational Technical Institute of Southern Illinois University], and it was with SIU Carbondale, but it was not at that location; it was in the Crab Orchard Lake area.

DePue: Crab Orchard?

Bowen: Yeah, Crab Orchard. The buildings and facilities, to my understanding, were the leftovers from World War II buildup where they had ordnance plants, housing for people, and they eventually turned that into a vocational training area, and that's where I went to vocational technical school as an accountant.

DePue: Why accounting?

Bowen: The unique thing about that is, again, I was trying to see if I could get to be a machinist operator or something to that effect. We went on a vacation in the summertime and got back after registration, and I couldn't get into some of the other courses I wanted. (laughter) So I ended up having to take bookkeeping, and I liked it, and I just felt very comfortable with it. I did really well in it and so ended up trying to figure out what it is I wanted to major in when I got to college. At this point in time, my dad's running the business, and he didn't know anything about bookkeeping and accounting, so I was trying to do that as a high school student, (laughs) and I realized there was a need for that. (laughs) So that's one of the reasons why I ended up majoring in accounting, because there was a need and also the fact that I had ended up taking courses in my—I believe probably my junior year—in bookkeeping and the calculating machines.

DePue: Your junior year?

Bowen: Of high school.

DePue: Oh, okay, okay.

Bowen: By the time I went to college, I ended up taking up accounting, and that was probably as broad as my horizons can let me see at that point in time.

DePue: When did you earn your associate's degree, then?

Bowen: Nineteen sixty-three.

DePue: Did you have any intentions of continuing and going after a bachelor's degree after that?

Bowen: No, there wasn't much motivating me to go on, but I had finished, and I didn't have any aspirations to go any farther. So I start looking for work.

DePue: But this is at a time when the Army's still kind of knocking on the door, aren't they?

Bowen: This is '63. The pressure is not on as much as it is later. So in '63, I'm looking at, okay, I'll take a chance, I'll try to find a job. What was odd is, recruiters would come to campus, and I would interview with [corporate] recruiters on campus. They would look at my transcript and say, Oh, you look good, but my company just doesn't hire people of color. So I began to accept that, and so I feel my bubble's getting ready to get burst here. Then I ended up figuring out, I'm going to need probably to go to a larger city where this could be more acceptable. Well, I sent my résumé in to Continental Can Company, interviewed a couple times on the phone, and they hired me to go to work, to report to work on a Monday in Chicago, and I made arrangements to do that, made arrangements for living there. I show up for work, and you [would have] thought I had the plague or something. The person that was supposed to meet me never came out to meet me unless he came out and didn't identify himself.

DePue: Well, to beg the obvious, what was the problem they had with you?

Bowen: (laughs) Well, it was unspoken, but it was obvious that they didn't have blacks working there, and they weren't about to let me be the first one in the door. Because they brought out a test—they said, "Well, okay, maybe you need to take a test." Now again, I was supposed to report to work, not to take a test. This was not an application process; it was agreed for me to start to work that Monday morning, be prepared. So they gave me a test I'm sure off of the shelf that they normally give bookkeepers, and, of course, me having a degree in accounting at the time and had just finished school, it was a piece of cake. I know good and well there's no question about whether or not I passed it. (laughs) Of course they have never told me to this day whether or not I did or didn't. (laughs) But they just told me to go home and they'll call me, and I still haven't got the phone call yet.

I had rented a room from my grade school teacher, and I was fortunate that she had some contacts, so she had me make a phone call to a couple people. Probably within a week I was working for Walgreens as an assistant manager. So it turned out to be a pretty good deal for me because they didn't have the same kind of issues as the Continental Can Company at the time.

DePue: How did you feel, though, when you were snubbed the way you were by the Continental Can Company?

Bowen: It was the way of life; I took it and moved on.

DePue: So you were kind of resigned to the way you were being treated? Internalized is what you said earlier.

Bowen: Yeah, yeah. That was basically life during that time period, and you couldn't let it kill your joy; you had to move on. If you carried that baggage around with you all day long, you're not going to be a healthy individual.

DePue: Were you paying attention to what was going on in the civil rights movement at that time? Because this is a period when the sit-ins occurring at…

Bowen: Probably Montgomery?

DePue: Yeah, Montgomery. Well—

Bowen: North Carolina as well, I think, the sit-ins. Of course, at this time, you're watching, and you're beginning to see it pop—

DePue: The Freedom Bus ride, yeah.

Bowen: You're beginning to see it pop up in the news, both newspapers as well as on TV. It was not a big issue, but it was growing, and the volume of information coming out was getting there. Then you begin to realize that these are things that are beginning to change. So you start beginning to pay a little bit more attention to it, but you're not driven to go out there and picket or—at least I wasn't at the time; I just knew this is the way it was, and you just kind of carved out your niche someplace else and moved on. You just figured out some way to get around the land mine that was there.

DePue: What was the neighborhood in Chicago where you were working?

Bowen: The neighborhood in Chicago I was working, it was sort of like a transition neighborhood. It was Forty-seventh and South Parkway, which is now part of Seventh and Martin Luther King. So at the time I was there—

DePue: It was near South Side—

Bowen: Yes, it was South Side. At the time I was there, it was the largest-volume store in the entire chain, so it was a high, high traffic, big volume store. I lived one block over, about forty-seven blocks up, on Calumet. It was a transition type of community where blacks had begun to start coming in, buying those brownstone homes, and the neighborhood had begun to change.

DePue: Well, what was the customer base, then, for the store? Was it both black and white?

Bowen: It was both black and white and probably predominantly black. To kind of give you some idea as to what it meant to the stores, we had eighteen wheelers that would show up on Wednesday, which is the day we used to get orders that would come in, and as the assistant manager, we had two people throwing things off the truck, and our job was to check off what was coming in.

Each store would get their allocation of certain kinds of products, and one of the things that was interesting is in some cases, you would get products that would be difficult to move. One of the ones that I know that we had a really challenging time trying to move was sun tanning lotion at my store in my neighborhood (DePue laughs) that was primarily black. Of course, there are some blacks that use suntan lotions, but basically to keep from getting burnt, sunburned. Very fair-skinned African-Americans do have to be as concerned as whites about getting sunburned. But what was interesting is that you'd use promotions to try to—like Walgreens is famous for its one-penny sales. You'd put alcohol, and for one penny more, you could get this or that. We'd try to do that, [for] one penny more you can get some suntan lotion, and people would just rip it off. (laughs) Because we would tape it together. They'd just rip it off and leave it in the store. Even if it was a penny, they didn't want it. (laughs)

As a manager, if you had a product in your store that's not moving, it's sort of like—we call it an alligator—that will eventually eat up your floor space, and you [shouldn't] have a lot of space in your store of products that were not moving. We had to figure out some way to get rid of that, and what we eventually did was trade with some of the northern stores that had more affluent neighborhoods that couldn't sell or get rid of paper products. So we would swap paper products for suntan lotion with some of the other stores. So—

DePue: You were learning a lot about the retail business.

Bowen: Oh, yeah, I learned a lot about retail business. It was interesting, too. During that timeframe Walgreens safe, where they put their proceeds of the day, would go in the front window. The safe was buried in the window so everybody coming by could see what was going on, and I guess also if somebody decides to rob us, somebody would see it. But they also paid in cash. (laughter) As a country boy, I was scared of getting robbed getting home, so before I would leave the store, I would put money in my right shoe, left shoe, this pocket, that pocket. (laughs)

DePue: Well, that was my other question, because you just mentioned it. You're from the country.

Bowen: Oh, yeah.

DePue: Colp is a tiny little place. And now you're in Chicago.

Bowen: And there's more people working in this store than living in my town. (laughs)

DePue: Did you like the big city?

Bowen: You know, I didn't. I couldn't see a future there. It was something I wanted to do and needed to do at that point in time in my life. I turned twenty-one in Chicago. I realized one day when the paper boy came collecting that it was time for me to start making a transition to get out of there. I had a paper boy come to me and say with tears in his eyes he was collecting that day and said, "Mister, would you please let me out your back door?" I said, "What's wrong, kid?" like I would if I was at home in Colp. He says, "Mister, if I go back outside, they're going to rob me and take my money that I collected from you." I said, "Well, hang on, I'll take care of this." I got about halfway down the stairs, almost to the door, and I realized I'm not in Colp. I don't know who I'm confronting. "I'll let you out the back door." (laughs)

DePue: Was he an African-American kid?

Bowen: Yes, he was. I went to work the next day, told my colleagues what happened, and some of the colleagues who were older than I was, had kids—I didn't have any kids—and they said, That's the reason I give my kid an allowance rather than let him work, because of this crazy stuff. Then I began to realize that, you know, if I'm ever going to get married or have a family, this is not where I want to be, and I have to have a plan to get out of here. (laughs) So I got kind of busy trying to figure out what to do and how my next move was going to be. Then when my dad ended up getting sick, it was my opportunity to go back home and enrolling at school at SIU Carbondale. I knew I couldn't just come home, because by this time the war effort in terms of the draft. really is hot and heavy.

DePue: What timeframe would that be?

Bowen: This is probably '65.

DePue: Okay, that's when things are really ramping up in Vietnam.

Bowen: Yeah, really ramping up, and if I wasn't in school, I probably was going to get my draft notice real soon. So I ended up getting in school, getting a 2-S deferment.

DePue: Which is because of school?

Bowen: Yeah, deferred as a student. You could for the most part be deferred until you graduated, and then you'd lose your 2-S deferment.

DePue: Well, I know for a little bit of time while you were still in Chicago, you also worked for Montgomery Ward.

Bowen: Yes, and this was also one of the motivators as well. When I worked at Walgreens, I ended up getting fired, and I didn't tell my parents about that until maybe after I got back from the military. (laughs) I ended up working for Montgomery Ward for a short period of time. I had decided I needed to come back home, but I didn't want to come back home right then. It was sort of in between a semester or something like that. So I ended up working for them, and it was a bad, bad job, and I didn't like it. I didn't enjoy it. It was basically the shipping department, where you had to box up and weigh boxes as they came off a conveyor belt.

DePue: So not as challenging as the Walgreens.

Bowen: Oh, no. (laughs)

DePue: Well, do you mind talking about what happened at Walgreens?

Bowen: What happened at Walgreens is that the manager of the store was also a pharmacist, and that's the way I think it was set up in most of the locations during that timeframe. His office was sitting by the time clock, and so after I would time out, he would ask me to do some things. I was single, I didn't have any commitments at home or anything like that, so it wasn't a big deal, I did it, but I just felt like he was using me, taking advantage of it, so I questioned that. Eventually, when we would schedule me to be off on certain weekends and I would make plans, then he would schedule me to work when I had plans with people coming in from southern Illinois and I had to work instead. So I did make—and it wasn't anything threatening, but I did question that, and eventually I think he let me go because of that. But—

DePue: You don't think there was any racial overtones to that decision?

Bowen: No, it wasn't, I don't… No, no, because he was African-American. I just think he was just trying to get more productivity for his store, and I probably wasn't being as much of a team player as he thought I should be.

DePue: So you're back at SIU, back in school.

Bowen: Back at SIU.

DePue: What was your major, then?

Bowen: Major now is business, because I could use most of my hours from accounting in the business program, so it was probably my shortest route to getting my bachelor's degree, because I had an associate's degree in accounting.

DePue: Well, you also had some experience under your belt in the retail world. Was that something you saw as a part of your future?

Bowen: Yes, yes, I could see that.

DePue: What was the next step, then? I think we're getting pretty close to the military experience here.

Bowen: Well, I'm getting pretty close to the military experience, because by this time, like I said, I'm back home, working in the family business here, the restaurant and the bar. Dad was told by his doctors he was not supposed to be working, having too much time with the public, because of his high blood pressure. So I was spending more hours at the store, trying to go to school full-time, and my grades began to slip.. I didn't really want to graduate with grades that weren't going to cause employers to look at me seriously. I wanted to cut down on my number of hours from being a full-time student to being a part-time student and then take up a head of the household [deferment], because at that point in time, I was taking care of Mom, my four siblings—two brothers, two sisters—as well as my dad, [and the] business. It wasn't like I could just set my own hours; it was a business, and it had to be run. So I ended up talking to the draft clerk about—

DePue: Who?

Bowen: The draft clerk.

DePue: Oh, okay, okay.

Bowen: At the draft office. I asked her could I get a head of household deferment. I think it was—oh, I don't remember those initials. I think it was an H-2. [3-A Extreme Hardship to Dependents?]

DePue: We probably can try and track that down, get that in the transcript for you.

Bowen: Okay. But anyway, the head of household recognition, and she told me I could get that, but I couldn't have both. First of all I wanted both. (laughs) I wanted it all. So—

DePue: It sounds like you really didn't want to go into the military at all.

Bowen: No, I didn't.

DePue: And because…?

Bowen: Well, they were killing people. (laughter) By this time, also, you're beginning to realize that there are a lot of protests around. This is not a noble thing for some people—a lot of people were buying in [to the idea] that this was [not??] such a noble war for us to be in. So it was very questionable about why we should even be there and whose war was it; whose war are we fighting? Are we fighting for any American causes? We didn't see any of that. That was some of the debate that was going around, and of course people were having these parties where they were, quote, burning their draft card. I can't believe that they were burning their draft card, because they were burning them every week. (laughs)

DePue: So this is part of the dialogue that's going on at SIU at the time.

Bowen: It's part of the dialogue going on at SIU. There were a lot of protests going on on campus. The president's house was in the center of campus, and often students would protest on campus and circle the president's home. Eventually he moved his house off-campus, I mean, out of the center of campus, and that was probably built after I came back out of the military.

DePue: Were you possibly looking at either the National Guard or Reserve as an option?

Bowen: I tried for the National Guard, couldn't get in; tried the Reserves, couldn't get in that. They just weren't having any openings for people of color at that time period. At one time, I carried a clipping in my pocket about that specific type of write-up about the Reserves and National Guard not accepting people of color during this period. It was nothing people flaunted, but it was just something that most people knew took place. So I tried to get that, and they agreed to give me the head of household deferment. I dropped or reduced the number of hours I had down from fourteen I think to twelve, and that put me in a different category, as a part-time [student], and then found out that they weren't going to give me my head of the household even though they said I qualified for it because I was the principle breadwinner for my mom, my dad, my two brothers and two sisters at the time.

DePue: Basically at that point in time, you're running the tavern.

Bowen: I'm running it. I'm running it. I'm doing the orders, hiring people, and also scheduling, doing all the banking stuff, accounting reports, all the reports of the filing for quarterly reports and income tax stuff.

DePue: This is a bit of an aside, but what was the clientele of the tavern and restaurant?

Bowen: During the day, for the most part, it was African-Americans, local people, and then we had people from the community who were white who came by and stopped to have a drink and life talk with people about their lives, and when

they were brought up and played baseball—against each other, and who was good, who wasn't, and just talk about life in general.

DePue: Did you like that work?

Bowen: Not really. (laughter) It had its ups and downs, but it was long hours, and of course it was a heck of a commitment during this time period for somebody in his early twenties. And it really didn't help your social life.

DePue: Well, I was going to ask you next, were there any women in your life at that time?

Bowen: Yeah, there was. I had a high school sweetheart I had dated throughout high school. Unfortunately, I think she wanted to get married a lot sooner than I wanted to, and we ended up parting ways. After that first, [I] didn't have that same type of a depth in terms of the person that I was dating; it was more of a date as opposed to long-term relationships.

DePue: Well, tell me about the process of finding yourself in the military, then, how that came about.

Bowen: Well, ended up before now(???) I had got my schedule for twelve hours, and then I get my notice from the draft clerk saying, "Welcome, (laughs) you've been inducted [in] to the military." So I made phone calls, saying, "Hey, what's this? I thought I could be exempt and get into a different category." "But it's too late now; you got to go." And so at this point, I'm trying to see, What can I do? I'm talking to people, seeing if I can get into the Reserves, see if I can get into the National Guard. Then I get—when you're working around a bar, you get all kinds of things thrown at you: Well, why don't you go to Canada where a lot of people are going; Why don't you change your name and do this? Well, none of those kinds of things appealed to me at all. (laughs) I just couldn't see myself running to Canada and being a fugitive the rest of my life as well as being on the run, either, for the rest of my life.

DePue: What timeframe was this? Do you remember the month and the year you would have gotten the letter?

Bowen: This was probably November or December.

DePue: Of '66?

Bowen: Yeah. But I remember in most cases—the shortest timeframe for most people was like ninety days to wrap up your affairs, and I had less than ninety days. So I thought I could protest under that basis and that they would listen to me and cut me some slack and give me another semester or something like that, but that didn't work either. So needless to say, I ended up having to go in on the seventeenth and get sworn in. My life changed quite a bit after that.

DePue: Into the Army, correct?

Bowen: Into the Army.

DePue: Now, earlier you said you had toyed around with the notion, Well, if I'm going to do this, I'm going to go to the Air Force.

Bowen: That meant at least four years. (laughter) And I know if it's something you don't like, you don't want a lot of it. (laughter) So I decided I'd just take the shortest route. Since I had to be someplace I didn't really want to be, I'd take the draft, which was drafting you for two years. So I took the draft with the Army. Of course at that time, you didn't get a lot of choices as to what career you were going to have in the military.

DePue: Where'd you go for basic, then?

Bowen: Went to basic at Fort Leonard Wood, sometimes referred to as Fort Lost-in-the-Woods.

DePue: Missouri.

Bowen: Yeah, right, right. Back in the hills; Fort Leonard Wood. This is December and this is not the best time to go in for basic training down at Fort Leonard Wood, because you had to do a lot of time out in cold weather. This is also, again, during the real massive buildup, because they had permanent housing down there, brick dorms, for the GIs to go through and to go through training, but they had reached their capacity, and they just threw up concrete slabs, tin Quonset huts, all over the place, and that's where we were in those tin Quonset huts. And after we—

DePue: Cold in the winter and hot in the summer, huh?

Bowen: Yes, yes, yes. Not much heat, and definitely no air conditioning. (laughter) Also, they put five buildings together on five slabs, two where the GIs stayed in. The center one was for the bathrooms, latrines, and showers, and so if you had to get up in the middle of the night, you had to at least get dressed, especially in that cold weather, as cold as it got down it Fort Leonard Wood. So you made sure that you didn't have to get up too much at night; you didn't drink too much after a certain time period. (laughs)

DePue: Well, Rich, pardon me, but it strikes me that you're a little bit different kind of recruit than a lot of the characters you're encountering at that time. A little bit older than most?

Bowen: Yeah. I'm a little older, and I also think that I'm thinking a little different than some of these other people. (laughs)

DePue: Well, you got more education than most, I would guess.

Bowen: Yes. And I wasn't happy about being drug in at this timeframe in my life. So I was not a happy camper. I was a little grumpy when it was appropriate. I pushed up to the line a lot of times, but I tried not to go over. There were times that I would do things to irritate people—

DePue: Like the drill sergeants?

Bowen: Not the drill sergeants. I think a couple of them knew that I was probably a little different, and they had one kid who ended up saying—I guess he couldn't take the training anymore, emotionally, physically—and just screamed out and said, "I quit." And of course the drill sergeant just found a field day in that. (laughs) And of course he—

DePue: That wasn't in his vocabulary, huh?

Bowen: Oh, no. Of course, he had to ask the young man, "What did you say?" several times, and "Louder." (laughter) Most of the people were kind of laughing about it. I had a somber look on my face. He said, "Boy, and I guess you don't like this." I didn't answer. Finally he asked me again. I said, "No, I really don't." "What you going to do about it?" Didn't answer again, and he asked again, and I said, "Well, I'm not going to do anything." He said, "What if I hit you with this rifle? What are you going to do about it?" By this time, I'm not sure where he's taking this, so I'm clamming up now. So he says, "What if I hit you with this rifle butt?" Finally I said to myself, Well, I think there's going to be something happening here. So I said, "You know, it depends on how I feel when I get up." Finally I guess he decided that maybe this is far enough with him, and he let me alone. But he did push a lot of people, and a lot of them broke down. I didn't and I think he probably respected me for that later because he ended up tagging me to be one of his platoon leaders.

But some of the other things—I think one of the lieutenants once, wanted me to scrub the orderly room with a brush that was probably four by eight, and I said, "You know, in the real world, we do this with a mop. It's more efficient doing it." He said, "No, I want you to do it with this brush." I realized at this point as a basic trainee, I can't go on leave; I'm here for basically two years. So I said, "Well, you know, it's going to take me a long time to do this. If that's what you want done, I'll do it." I just basically took my sweet time. I found out later, he had a date. (laughs) So I stayed [kept?] him. He finally said, "Boy, you do this floor any way you want to; I'm gone." (laughter) So I did push them a little bit on some certain things.

There was another one during this time period. They wanted all the GIs to sign up for U.S. savings bonds. Not that I didn't want U.S. savings bonds, the fact [was] that I just wanted to protest more than anything. I think they had just about everybody in the company to sign up, [except] about two or three people still left that hadn't signed up. So the two or three people that hadn't signed up ended up getting called into the first sergeant's office and

had to sit down—small room—and start getting the sales pitch as to why we should get U.S. savings bonds. I told him I didn't want any, and then he wanted to give me the reasons why we should, and I was giving him the reasons why I shouldn't. So that went back and forth for a while. Finally I realized that I probably can't tell him no, (laughs) but I got to figure out some other way to get out of doing this. So I eventually ended up saying, "It does make sense to get savings bonds. If you have to have them, you might as well get a big one." So I ended up saying, "Well, if I'm going to take one, I want a five-hundred-dollar-a-month savings bond," and I only made I think ninety-nine dollars a month. (laughter)

DePue: See, this is the accountant in you coming out.

Bowen: Yeah. So finally he says, "Okay, boy, get out of here, and I don't want you talking with nobody else about this." (laughter) So I left, and the next thing I knew, our company was up for 100 percent participation in U.S. savings bonds, but I never did participate. (laughter)

DePue: Did you think any of the treatment you got had anything to do with your being black?

Bowen: No, no.

DePue: Were there any racial tensions while you were going through basic training?

Bowen: No, no. I think for some reason, the military must have been really, really good at keeping things like that at bay. If they picked on you, they picked on you because you were weak emotionally or physically. I don't think it had anything to do with a person's color or nationality at that time. If you got teased, you got teased because you had an odd last name, it wasn't because of your color. I don't think you got overlooked for rank or promotion at that time period because of color. I wasn't being singled out because I didn't buy savings bonds because of my color; it was because I wasn't cooperating. (laughs) Had I cooperated, I wouldn't have been singled out.

DePue: Well, yeah, the Army doesn't take it lightly when you don't cooperate.

Bowen: That's right, so I had to figure out another way of cooperating, since I couldn't say no, but I did say yes to a five-hundred-dollar savings bond, which is my way of saying no.

DePue: Now, I know that after basic training, next is advanced individual training, AIT.

Bowen: Yes.

DePue: Did you have any choice in what kind of additional training you were going to get?

Bowen: No, it was like (laughs)—like Forrest Gump would say, you know, it was like you got orders out of a cracker jack box; you don't know what box the orders are going to come out of. So everybody stood around like, What'd you get; What'd you get; What'd you get? (laughs) It depended upon what the military needed at that specific point in time when they were trying to turn that mass production machine of people out, and we were just bodies that needed to be trained to do certain things at the time period, and it had very little to do with what you wanted.

DePue: So, Rich, what'd you get?

Bowen: Well, initially it was combat engineer, which basically ended up getting me trained as I call it, a mechanic. I can't remember what specific number it was.

DePue: A heavy equipment mechanic?

Bowen: Yeah, heavy equipment mechanic.

DePue: Did you have any affinity for being a heavy equipment mechanic?

Bowen: No, no. I just knew I had a lot of respect for it and people who drove them. (laughs) I didn't want to drive one, I didn't want to repair one, but I found myself in that position. Then when they told me that if I broke or wrecked or tore up one of these equipments, they would take it out of my paycheck… I know that one of these cranes probably in those days cost fifty to a hundred thousand dollars, and there was no way that three or four generations of my family could ever pay for that, (laughter) especially at that rate of pay. I ended up being trained to turn on these motors and to rebuild them or to repair them. I ended up being teamed up with a fellow from Kentucky named Cotton(??) was his last name, and—

DePue: Do you remember the first name?

Bowen: You know, I don't remember Cotton's first name. I might have it on some of those orders if I can ever find them. But Cotton was one of those people who came into the military under Project 100,000. Some of these people ended up finding themselves in court, and they had a choice; either come in the military or they could do their time in prison. In Cotton's case, it was for stealing cars. He liked cars well enough that he wanted to steal them. But Cotton was good with cars. He was a good mechanic. He loved cars, the mechanic side of cars. But he was not too smart when it came down to the paper side of doing things. So Cotton would do the hands-on stuff for the motor; I would pass the tests for both of us that had to be passed. But he just had this natural knack for repairing cars and knowing where all these parts belong without reading the diagrams. It probably would have taken me a month to do what he could probably do in a week, because I had to read the diagram and match up the parts with the tool and all that kind of stuff. He just did it instinctively, and [knew] how something like that was done.

But Cotton had me pretty scared one weekend. We were able to go off base, and I caught a bus back to my hometown, I think for, like, an extended weekend. [When] we got back to base and we were all kind of gathering around, trying to figure out who all's back and what we're going to be doing the next week, I couldn't find Cotton; he wasn't anyplace around. I was wondering, Oh, boy, if he doesn't come back, who are they going to pair me up with? (laughter) We might fail. So finally somebody says, "Haven't you heard what happened to Cotton?" "No, I haven't." "Well, when we left, Cotton went off base to the nearest town and stole a car." (DePue laughs) So now I'm fearful that Cotton(??) is probably either back home and not coming back or he either got caught and maybe is in jail. What turned out—Cotton drove this car around all weekend, and he got caught within two or three blocks of bringing the car back. He was a nice guy. (laughs) He was sweating whether or not the people who he stole the car from were going to press charges, because if they pressed charges, that meant he was probably going to end up going back and spending his time in prison. He had a chance to straighten his life out by getting in the military and going straight.

DePue: So he essentially was on parole.

Bowen: Oh, yeah, yeah. I think Cotton repaired something on the car, and so he brought the car back probably in better shape than it was when he took it. (laughter) I think the people had sort of a heart for most GIs at the time, anyway, so they didn't press charges, and so Cotton was able to live to work on cars another day because of that.

Defense Secretary, I think, McNamara was the person who sort of spearheaded this Project 100,000, and these are people who hadn't finished high school, people who were on the fringe with the law. He was able to get—

DePue: Folks that scored low on the…

Bowen: Scored low on the exams. So these [people] are a way for him to pick up an additional hundred thousand men to be in the military, because, let's face it, you were going to be fodder for somebody. (laughs)

DePue: Well, it illustrates that the military was really spread a lot farther than it had just a few years before.

Bowen: Yes, and so they were really trying to pick up the numbers. They just weren't getting as many people volunteering because of the mood of the country at the time.

DePue: Were you in basic and AIT about the time that Muhammad Ali was protesting?

Bowen: Yes. This was the time period that Muhammad Ali was saying, "I could do more for the military by fighting and buying jet planes than for me to actually be in," and he was protesting under some I think religious basis, and he was going through the legal system. They were saying that if he came in, he would probably end up being in our unit, and how we were supposed to act and behave and treat him if he did come in. So that was there.

Muhammad Ali, I don't have to tell most people who know him—most people either loved him or hated him; it was not anything in between. [That was] because of his personality and style and his arrogance about his ability and being so outspoken about all kinds of things in life at that time. It was amazing the number of people who either loved him or hated him. He could stir the emotions on both sides. I'm sure that's the reason why he was able to get record paydays for his fights, because there were people who came to see him win; there were people who came to see him lose. (laughs) So they paid pretty good money to see him to do that. He set all kinds of records in terms of that time period about what kind of purse they could pick up for fighting. But in the meantime, the military was concerned about if he came in, and how are we going to treat somebody this arrogant who was so outspoken and who was probably pretty physically fit. So the training itself was probably not going to get him; it was the fact that his philosophy on life was probably going to get him in more trouble than being able to physically get through the cycles of service.

DePue: Would you think it's fair to say that he was the most famous athlete in the world at that time?

Bowen: There's no question about it. He was famous, and he was on TV a lot, and—

DePue: He was outspoken.

Bowen: Right. Outspoken, and he was able to draw a lot of protests, and he was able to draw both sides. He did a lot of the interviews. I think this was also during the time that Howard Cosell, an outstanding sports announcer, interviewed Ali on his shows a lot. He was getting a lot of press time.

DePue: For those who remember those days, we not only can see those people, we can hear their voices, too.

Bowen: Yes, yes. He did certain things that had people talking about the interviews, because he was a self-promoter, and even talked about snatching Howard Cosell's wig off his head (laughter) in one of the interviews. Those kinds of things were really kind of provoking, and so it just made you talk about whether or not he should win or lose or he should go in or he shouldn't go in.

DePue: I know you've got other stories that I think are illustrative of what McNamara's 100,000 were about that come from the AIT. I wonder if you could tell us a couple more.

Bowen: Well, there was one other time in the AIT, I had locked my keys in my locker, on a Friday, so we were trying to figure out how I could get the CQ [in charge of quarters] to get some bolt cutters to cut my lock off and then get to the PX [post exchange] before they closed to get a new lock. Well, one of the guys in the unit, George, says, "Let me see your lock before we do all that," and he went to my lock and opened my locker quicker than I could with my key. I said, "Well, you know, I'm glad you're in my unit, because if anything comes up missing, (laughter) I know who to get." Again, he was one of these other people, too—he was in for petty theft. He was another Project 100,000. So I think in this group, there was a high percentage of people who had had some type of background with the law, and they were in our unit. For the most part, they had skills (laughs) that the rest of society wished they didn't have, and they were not afraid to use them. It turns out that we had other people who were arsonists, who had burned or tried to set people's houses on fire, so they got caught doing stuff like that. We had a lot of those kinds of people who were in the military during this time period.

DePue: What were you thinking in terms of the wisdom of this while you were going through that training and encountering these people?

Bowen: You know, I guess I was old enough to see both sides of this thing, in that some of these people I knew could probably turn their life around, and I think most of them probably did. I'd like to see the long-term report on it, (laughs) but I think for the most part, they did work well within the limits of what the military [required?], and they did their jobs. Their types of background and behavior really didn't come out, except for those kinds of incidents that take place. You probably wouldn't have guessed any other way unless they were talking about it in some kind of conversation. It kept another hundred thousand or two hundred thousand out, other military (??), because they were able to come in. Of course, there were some people who would do stuff to get themselves in trouble with the law and figured that, If I had a record, they won't take me in. Then when McNamara decided that, hey, if it's not too bad, we're still going to take you—we're still willing to take you. The judges really helped him achieve his objective. When some of these young men came before those judges, some of those judges could be very effective at telling them what the other side of this charge could be, which is, you go to prison, and what prison was like, and here's a chance for you to straighten your life up. Most young people came into court with either their parents or somebody who cared something about them and tried to help them make a good choice or decision at the time.

DePue: You had a story about a PT test, physical training test.

Bowen: Yeah, that was a really kind of interesting one. We had a cook from New Orleans, and I wish I could remember his name, but he was probably closer to three hundred than he was to (laughs) two-fifty. So he was a pretty good-sized fellow, and it made it very difficult for him to pass the PT test, both the mile

and the pull-up tests and some other things that he had to do. But his personality was such—he was a very likeable person, and everybody was trying to coach him, trying to give him some extra workouts so he could pass his test. He had tried several attempts, and they didn't know what they were going to have to end up doing with him. Finally some kid that was probably 130 pounds decided that he would take the test for him. So he put on one of George's shirts with the name on it and went over there to pass the test for him, and he got caught. (laughs) I think it just didn't match, this (laughs) 135-pound guy sitting in on a test for somebody that weighed about three hundred. (laughter) But that was some of the things that people did in terms of being able to have some camaraderie with people, to help each other out. He was just another fellow soldier saying, Hey, I'll see what I can do to help you out here. To my knowledge, there was never any money exchanged hands, it was a voluntary thing on his part to try to help him out.

DePue: Well, isn't that one of the things the military's trying to teach you guys, that work is a team [effort]?

Bowen: Yeah, yeah, yeah, and that was working in terms for that. (laughter)

DePue: Maybe that's not quite what they had in mind, huh?

Bowen: No, it probably wasn't. No.

DePue: It's about this time you get close to finishing AIT, and you're starting to ask, Okay, now what's going to happen next? What was the plan the Army had for you after this?

Bowen: Well, the majority of the times, when you finished AIT, you caught a plane to Vietnam. (laughs) But I had gone into a hospital for twenty-four days because of an abscess from the tetanus shot that I received when I first did my shots when I came in the military. Eventually it got really big and I really couldn't hardly use my arm, and it was just awful. I tried to go to sick call to see a doctor, and everybody thought I was just trying to get out of work. Of course, that was the first thing in people's minds—He's just using some excuse to keep from going to training today, and most of those guys, you had to have so many hours of different kinds of training; if not, they figured you weren't going to be prepared. So I finally got a chance to go see the doctor at sick call, and he says, "Wow, how come you're just now coming to see me?" I said, "Well, doc, you've been in this military longer than I have. (DePue laughs) I tried; it was unsuccessful." (laughs) He said, "Well, we're going to have to do surgery on you right away, today," but it was the next morning [when I] ended up having surgery. They basically lanced it open and put about twenty-four feet of gauze in that opening that they cut open and drained it out.

By being in the hospital for twenty-four days, I was—I can't remember what week I was in my basic, but I basically had to get recycled

and then catch another unit in the same week I was when I got back out of the hospital. Because of that, I ended up with a different set of orders. I ended up getting the first orders going to Vietnam, and the second orders, I ended up going to Germany.

DePue: Do you remember the unit you were going to be assigned to in Vietnam, or was it just orders to Nam and then assignment there to a specific unit?

Bowen: I don't remember. I really did look, because I think I had those orders, and I still think I have them around someplace. I really found out later—I ran into somebody, and they told me that that unit ended up getting ambushed when they landed in Vietnam. The way the military traveled, I think, then—my understanding is also even today—is that the GIs have their weapons with them, but the ammo is in another location, and it's locked. So when they opened the belly of the plane up, that's when supposedly they got ambushed. Of course, it takes time to get weapons and ammo together in one spot so you can defend yourself, and that took some time. It was kind of like sitting ducks. Quite a few of them, I understand, got killed during that timeframe.

DePue: Yeah, those are the kind of stories that move quickly through an organization like the military.

Bowen: Yes, yes, and you begin to realize, Wow, that could have been me. So.

DePue: Well, you had a religious background. Did that make you stop and think about why it wasn't you?

Bowen: You know, I did think about that and stated, you know, I think the Good Lord has got something else for me to do yet, and I don't know what it is, but I hope I'm ready. (laughs) When I finally did get my orders to go, I had to go through Fort Dix, New Jersey, to get there.

DePue: Okay, to go to Germany now.

Bowen: To go to Germany, to go to Germany. We were processed through Fort Dix. We were scheduled to leave on the Overseas National Airline, and it was delayed because they had a prop that wasn't working, so they flew one in I think from Texas to put on a plane. They got it fixed, and we left I think about six hours later than we were scheduled to leave. We started out through Shannon Island, and it was going to be our first stop before we landed in Frankfurt, Germany. I don't know if it was assigned to me or that I just decided to park there, but I had taken a seat by the wing—and so on my way over, one of the props outside on my wing quit spinning. And—

DePue: That would get your attention, didn't it?

Bowen: Yeah, like, Is that supposed to happen? (laughs) It's a four-engine prop; they said, No big deal, we've got three. (laughs) I'm on the right side of the plane,

and, okay, all right, I believe them; we can make it in. Then on the other side, one of them quits. Now we have two props flying and two not spinning.

DePue: Are you over the ocean at this time?

Bowen: Yes, we're over the ocean, and we've been over the ocean a few hours. Finally I see out my window smoke coming out of the last one that's on this side. Now I'm a little nervous. I'm afraid. (laughs) Finally I think we get some kind of word saying that we're not at the point of no return yet; we probably are going to make a turn around and go back to the nearest place on land. So finally, about midnight, we turn around and head back towards the U.S., and ended up landing in Gander, Newfoundland.

DePue: Was this military or civilian aircraft?

Bowen: It's a civilian aircraft. This is a contractual aircraft.

DePue: Lowest bidder, maybe.

Bowen: Yes, the lowest bidder. And I also pointed out to myself that I was never going to forget this airline because I would never want to fly it again. (laughs) So it's early morning when we're finally seeing land, and all the sudden people start smiling and laughing, and hurray, we can see trees down. We get in at Gander, Newfoundland over land, and there are all kinds of fire trucks lining the runway. I'm saying, This is a lot [more] serious than they let on. (laughs) I'm thinking all along that this is a lot more serious than they let on, because this is the military, and they turned around, and that's something they don't do. (laughs) So we landed in Gander, Newfoundland. We didn't have a fire, but I'm sure they thought there seriously could have been, and especially if this other motor would have eventually died on this other side. But it sure looked like it was when I saw the smoke in the motor coming down—I mean, all coming down the wing.

So we got off the plane, and then they said, We're going to be here until they bring us replacement props for the plane, and then we'll leave. I think we were on ground three days before they flew all the props back in to replace them. I'm saying, I'm in Gander, Newfoundland. Why don't I just go AWOL? Maybe this is my chance. (laughs) Maybe this is what the Lord is telling me, to get off here. Because I'm thinking, Why should I get back on this plane? I had this much trouble with this plane, and I'm really debating what to do. So I'm saying, Well, you know, I already went this far; I might as well do the right thing here. So about three days later, they got all the props up and we're ready to get back on, and I got back on the plane. But the thought sure came across my mind. (laughter)

DePue: Well, you just mentioned something. Earlier in your discussion, you were describing basic training. You were somewhat of a reluctant soldier. Had you had any change in attitude, or you're still… I'm trying to find a delicate

way… were you still a reluctant soldier at this point in time? Apparently you were.

Bowen: No, no. What happened—I had this wakeup call in the hospital. When I was in the hospital, I had a lot of time to think, because probably if I was in civilian life they probably wouldn't have left me in the hospital that long, but they didn't know what else to do with somebody, so I was able to stay at the hospital, probably a longer recovery time than I probably should have had if I was in civilian life. So I had a lot of time to think about what I was doing, and then I began to realize, The Army is a lot bigger than I am, and I can't beat it, (laughs) so I'm going to have to learn how to get along and learn how to go along with what they ask me to do, because if not, I'm going to be fighting a losing battle. So by this time, my attitude had changed around, and I'm here, and I'm going to make the best of it. That's what I decided to do, quit playing these little games with people and start being a part of the team as opposed to being on the outside looking in.

DePue: Okay. We're already past two hours here—that might surprise you that we've been at this long.

Bowen: Yeah, it is.

DePue: This is a very interesting interview. We've got a lot more territory to cover about your experiences in Germany, but this is probably a good place to take a quick break.

Bowen: Okay, I could use that.

DePue: Okay.

(end of interview #1 #2 continues)

Interview with Richard Bowen

VRC-A-L-2010-009.2

Interview # 2: March 11, 2010

Interviewer: Mark DePue

DePue: Today is Thursday, March 11, 2010. My name is Mark DePue; I'm the director of oral history for the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. I'm here again with Richard Bowen. How are you, Rich?

Bowen: Doing great.

DePue: It's the afternoon. We're here at the library. The last time we talked about your memories about growing up in south-central Illinois and joining the military—or they kind of joined you, maybe.

Bowen: Yes.

DePue: It was some fascinating stuff, but as so oftentimes happens, when we got done with the interview, you said that you wanted to talk a little bit more today about when you were younger and growing up before we got into your experiences in Germany and the Army. I think they related to the civil rights movement when you were younger?

Bowen: I don't know if it was necessarily the movement, but I just know that living in a segregated community, we probably were looking at the world a little differently than a lot of other people. We had a community that was really, really segregated. Most of the blacks lived in one part of town, whites lived in the other, but the town wasn't that big, so we moved about. We shopped for groceries and clothes and those kinds of things in other communities, because the place wasn't large enough for that. In some stores, you could try on things; others, you couldn't. But we kind of knew who those stores were, and those are the ones we shopped. Also, a lot of the elderly people in the community, the adults, did work at some of those private [white owned?] homes during that time period as cooks or cleaning and doing domestic kinds of work, including my aunt and my grandmother, who were very instrumental

in my life. They worked for some very influential families, and there's times that they could make a phone call and make things happen for one of us or an individual of color who might have been struggling with somebody, might have been giving somebody a rough time.

DePue: Now, is that your aunt and your grandmother, or is that the people that they were working with who could kind of help out?

Bowen: My aunt, my grandmother, I believe, evidently, had shared what was going on, and they worked with people, either doctors, I think in one case, and another situation was my aunt worked for Earl Walker, and he ran the vending machines and bowling alleys in southern Illinois. He had quite an influence on people's behavior. (laughter)

DePue: Were these people living in Colp?

Bowen: No, they lived in Herrin, and that's where my aunt worked for Mrs. Walker and Earl Walker.

DePue: Mm-hmm. Where'd you folks go, then, if you were doing some serious shopping?

Bowen: Went to Herrin, and occasionally we would—I seem like I remember maybe shopping in Carterville maybe for furniture, but for the most part, we dealt with a lot of Jewish stores in Herrin, at Zahn's and Zewig's(??), names like that. Also, if we wanted it, we could get credit at those places, and other places, we couldn't.

DePue: Did that depend on your race, or was that just the different policies in the stores?

Bowen: You know, being a kid, I'm not sure how widespread it was. We just know that a lot of stores didn't extend that, but they [certain ones?] did, and so evidently that was the place that ended up receiving a lot of our family business, the money that we spent.

DePue: Was Carbondale then considered the big city? Did you ever go there?

Bowen: Carbondale was the big city. We didn't go there that often in the early days. When we got older, I think Carbondale began to be a much larger place of interest. As the university grew, they began to put more and more stores located on and near the campus, and then they start having bigger stores but not malls at this point, and that began to hurt some of those local stores here, in Carterville and Johnson City and some of the smaller communities. The typical store that wasn't a chain began to feel the pressure of people kind of fleeing their business.

DePue: I would imagine that when you went to Herrin, you weren't shopping at places that were targeting the black community as their main source of customers, would that be right?

Bowen: No, it wasn't a target at that, it's just that you were welcome and that they would treat you with respect. So that's kind of where you continued your business.

DePue: Well, what else did you want to share with us in terms of some of your memories and recollections from those days?

Bowen: As a teenager growing up, we kind of drove around and tried to look for some girls. (laughter)

DePue: I'm shocked. (laughter)

Bowen: And we found ourselves, a lot of times, in Marion, Illinois. This is also where another group of African-Americans was located.

DePue: Meeron?

Bowen: Marion—M-e-r-r-i-o-n [*sic*]. That was also the county seat. They had a similar population in terms of—I think both of them probably at the time was between ten, fifteen thousand people. And then DuQuoin was another town, and Carbondale.

DePue: Did you have any experiences when you went to these other places?

Bowen: Hey, we knew exactly where to go, (laughter) and we normally stayed on the correct path so we avoided conflict. One of the pictures you have here is the 1953 basketball team, and we played white schools, but we also had a number of African-American schools, schools of color, that we also played as well—Harrisburg, (Unintelligible??), Carbondale, just to name a few. And we also played the white communities as well. We did not always receive a good welcome from the white towns that we did play in. The coaches always complained that we didn't get a fair shake by the referees. I remember one specific situation that we went to, playing a team. We went ahead and came there prepared to play, and the officials had told us that if we played, we were going to have to forfeit the game. We didn't know why, and they said that we didn't pay a fee on time. And they said, "Well, I thought we were supposed to pay the fee when we arrived," at least the coach did, and said, "We're prepared to pay the fee today. That's what it takes." He said, "No, it's too late, but if you guys want to play, we'll let you play." (laughs) Because I'm sure that they really didn't want us to win the tournament. So the coach decided that rather than let the first team play, they let the second team play, so he was determined that this school was not going to beat his first team. So we played, and it was an opportunity for me to play; other than that, I probably wouldn't

have been able to play, because I really wasn't on the first team, I was on the second team at the time.

DePue: Was this when you were attending junior high school?

Bowen: Yeah, junior high.

DePue: Which was all-black school?

Bowen: All black. Actually, it was not really called a junior high; it was first grade through eighth grade. So I remember us playing that specific game, and my second team won. The first team sat on the bench. I also remember playing over in Energy, Illinois, where we were down by over twenty-five points at halftime, and our coach used some fear tactics (laughs) in order to motivate [us]. Of course, at the time, I wasn't able to see all that, what he was trying to do. But he asked each player at halftime, when we were all pulled in the room, and asked each player individually who was going to win this game. One by one everybody would say, "They are," "They are." I had been around him long enough—probably longer than most other players, because the year before that, I was the manager of the varsity team—and I knew he was not getting the answer he wanted to hear. I'm not sure if I believed it, but I told him, "We are." (laughs) Everybody who said "they are," that the other team was going to win, he pulled his paddle out of the bag and they got about three or four swats with the paddle and said that if they win, you're going to have to walk home. This is an all-white town, [at] night, (laughs) and so the fear was there, more so of that than of the paddle. We turned that game around, and we won close to about twenty-five points by the time the game was over. But I think we must have gone into that game to with an awful lot of fear, because we just weren't playing at our capacity. Eventually we won that game because of that [fear].

DePue: So he just channelized that fear in a different direction, huh?

Bowen: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. And, of course, having been told by not only parents and other people in the community—we knew that this was a sundown town, that we were not supposed to be caught there after dark, but we were playing this basketball, which was okay—we had a reason to be there—and as soon as we got in the car, we were supposed to leave. So that was definitely a motivator.

DePue: What do you suppose would happen today if a coach were to use that kind of motivation?

Bowen: Oh, he'd probably get fired, (laughter) and at least be written up by the board, be on suspension or something.

DePue: Did you or any of the other players go home and complain to the folks about what had happened?

Bowen: No. No way. (laughs) It turned out that my dad and the coach grew up about three houses from each other, but I was unaware of their friendship. (laughs) We didn't have a phone, and I think there were very few phones in the community, but I couldn't figure out why it was that if I got into trouble, if I did something in school, that my dad knew about it by the end of the day. (laughter) It took me a long time to figure that out. He would ask me, "How did things go at school today?" I would say, "Okay." "What about so-and-so?" And I'm like, How did he find that out? (laughs) Yeah, it was years later—I think I might have been out of high school when I found out that they were friends. I think they used to stop, have a beer or something, in the afternoon at this one tavern that most people in the community kind of frequent. It's sort of like a place where everybody gathered together, got their news and moved on about the rest of the day.

DePue: I would imagine, though, that your younger siblings—and quite a bit younger than you—they would pay attention to those kinds of discussions between you and your dad, too, and kind of file those memories away.

Bowen: I think so, yes. But with them being so much younger than I was—you know, eleven years between myself and my oldest sister, and then the rest of them were probably within a year and a half, two years of each other. There were five of us total. (Please finish the thought about whether your younger siblings filed away any memories)

DePue: I think you already mentioned that you were more of an authority figure or kind of a surrogate—well, not a father, but you were that much older and had a different relationship with them.

Bowen: Yes, it was. And it's really kind of odd because there's certain kinds of things that they don't tell me first, (laughs) or either I'm the last to know.

DePue: Still to this day, huh?

Bowen: Yeah, still to this day.

DePue: You remember going, and especially when you were in the all-black teams that you were playing on—going into some of these communities, and the crowds would heckle the team?

Bowen: Yeah, they would heckle the team. We didn't get much of that inside the place, which, I'm sure if we did, we probably would've quit playing—but it seemed like the referees, coaches, and other people seemed to keep the lid on that kind of activity. It was getting from the gym to either our cars or the bus that we might have been on that seemed to be where you get these insults thrown at you, or either a rock or apple or something that somebody hurled at you or the bus.

DePue: Would it be correct to say that the one game you just told me about, where the coach had to take some drastic measures to get you motivated, that that happened when you first went into the gym in that game?

Bowen: You know, I don't remember that happening.

DePue: But you said the team was kind of afraid, or something was in their brain.

Bowen: Yeah, I don't know if the fact that we knew we were going to Energy to play and were going to be there at night (laughs) and that these kids probably were going to beat us up or something—I don't know what was going on in our minds at the time, but I do know we were behind at halftime, (laughter) and the coach probably felt like, These guys are no better than you are, and I've got to figure out some way to motivate you, and he definitely was able to figure that out, what it took to motivate us, which is to threaten to leave us down there and let us walk home.

DePue: Well, that is a good story, Rich. Anything else?

Bowen: We seemed to have basically kind of suppressed a lot of the feelings. We just learned to live with the situation and adjust and move on.

DePue: Do you travel down there now occasionally?

Bowen: I do, occasionally.

DePue: Is there a different feeling now when you go back?

Bowen: Oh, tremendously different. Matter of fact, at the time I was down there, they didn't have blacks living in those places, in Herrin, in Energy, in Carterville, in some of those, quote, "sundown towns." They're there now. Of course, we later went to Herrin to go to high school, but now they in there in grade school, this high school, because it's just the nature of what happened to the school systems. Those small schools just could not continue to exist, and so they continued to consolidate and end up going to the larger communities for schools.

DePue: Well, some of those small towns take their time to change. What would you credit the change in attitude to?

Bowen: I think some of that came along with the enforcement of certain laws. I remember when the maximum-security prison down in Mounds was being built, and they brought a lot of federal employees into the area. Some of them had trouble staying at some of the small communities near there. They threatened to cut off their money supply, and all the sudden, some of this bad behavior began to quit, because I'm sure certain people knew who these bad characters were and decided that they would get these people in line; if not, it was going to cost the community.

DePue: Do you think integration in the schools at even the lowest levels, kindergarten on, played a role in that as well?

Bowen: I think so. I think so. Yeah. I don't remember any real problem with busing the kids in and kids having any difficulty on a large scale or anything like that. Of course, like any teenagers or even kids, they're going to have some difficulties on the playground or lunch period or whatever—they're a spy all the time.

DePue: Okay. Well, if you don't mind, let's kind of take a leap forward here and talk about your arrival in Germany. Are we ready to go there?

Bowen: I think we got there in…

DePue: You talked in some detail about the…

Bowen: Airline overseas?

DePue: The endless flight that you had overseas.

Bowen: Yes. Finally we get there, and tried to get settled in to the company. At the time, we were not allowed to leave the company for thirty days. I think one of the things that they asked GIs then was to send your civilian clothes by boat, because they knew it took approximately thirty days. They didn't want you to have your civilian clothes and go off base immediately. So you couldn't go off base unless you were in your first class uniforms, when we were stationed in Germany. As a result, I ended up taking a lot of USO tours, and that's where I picked up the hobby of taking pictures. I just made a point of trying to see some of the different parts of Europe throughout. On the base itself—

DePue: What was the base?

Bowen: The base was in Kissingen, Germany.

DePue: And your unit of assignment there?

Bowen: Boy, I'm going to have to…

DePue: What we had talked about before, when you were showing me your records—tell me if this is correct—Company E, 10th Engineer Battalion, with the 3rd Infantry Division.

Bowen: Yeah, that's it. I'm sorry I was a little rusty on that one.

DePue: No problem.

Bowen: I eventually became a company clerk, and as the company clerk you had to do the morning report, and I'm sure I had to put that on the report every day, or

more than once a day. Certain things just didn't stay as long as others. But on that base was an old barracks; I think it had been used in Germany during World War II. So it was an old building that we were in. And we stayed there on post, on base there. The motor pool was probably at least a couple miles away, and ammo sites were even father away.

DePue: On this particular base, was there a large training area on the base, or did you have to travel elsewhere to find that training area?

Bowen: There was not a large training area. When we had to train, we ended up training in Grafenwöhr or Wildflecken. That training was typically brought about unannounced. We would get some kind of notice, either at night or sometimes—most of the time—during late evening, and we would have to pack up and head to the field and go through exercises. Typically those exercises were based on some directive that Robert McNamara thought we needed additional training on. We were the combat engineering troop, and we built bridges, roads, and all, so we knew how to blow those bridges and roads up in order to stop the advancements of the Russians. They were stationed within three miles of the border; we were stationed seven miles from the border. We knew that we probably were not going to be on the offense, we would probably be on the defense, and because of that, most of us considered our mission to be a suicide mission (laughs) if in fact war did break out. There were a number of times that tension was very high between the Russians and the U.S. Whenever there was news in the paper that some East German or a family had escaped, usually it brought about a lot of tension on both sides of the border.

DePue: Did you ever recall thinking that, Well, this could very well happen, getting to that point, the attitude that it's likely to happen?

Bowen: Yeah, we constantly thought about that, especially when these events took place and when the tension went up. But typically there were periods of time where there were no signs of activity going on on either side, and that was always a good feeling to have, because I don't think either one of us wanted to kill each other, but we knew that somebody higher up on either side could send the signal, and we would have to go into action. So we had to train a lot of times, and we'd have to go across farmers' fields, and if we took a personnel carrier or one of our tanks across the farmer's field, he would raise a lot of hell to our company. It was my understanding that the agreement was that eventually that farmer would end up with ten years' worth of income off of his fields just for us to run over there for a period of time that really didn't damage that much of his crop. It probably did do some damage, but it sure didn't damage ten years' worth of income off the crop.

DePue: Would you describe this as pretty good training?

Bowen: It was good training; however, I just didn't think it was appropriate training if we were going to end up going to Vietnam. Because for the most part, Germany's very, very, very cold, and for the most part kind of dry land where as you have a different terrain in Vietnam—wet seasons and swamp and forest conditions, heavy foliage. We didn't have that there in Germany.

DePue: Well, let's put this discussion into a time context here. Do you recall roughly when you arrived in Germany?

Bowen: It was I believe like the fall of the year.

DePue: Of 1967?

Bowen: Yeah, '67, yeah. I just remember the mornings being very, very foggy and somewhat cold. This is not quite wintertime yet. I found out very shortly thereafter that winter had begun to fall. I'm from the Midwest; I know what winter's supposed to be like. What I didn't realize—there's a big difference between German winter and the Midwest winter. It was really, really cold. Whenever we went in the field for training, we had Arctic kind of gear that we had to put on and sleep with.

DePue: Was this a wet cold compared to what you had back in the Midwest?

Bowen: Wet cold. A lot of wind that came with it. And the snow seemed to be a lot—it just felt colder. (laughs) It probably wasn't, but…

DePue: Well, maybe you were spending a little bit more of the time outside.

Bowen: That probably was it. We did spend a lot of time in the field, and of course the Jeeps and the PCs and things that we traveled in just really didn't have those kinds of heaters in them.

DePue: Well, let's talk about your specific assignment when you initially arrived there. What was your job description?

Bowen: Well, my initial assignment when I arrived—I ended up being assigned to the motor pool. I just didn't fit too well at the motor pool, and my—

DePue: You didn't have your buddy from AIT there with you.

Bowen: No, he wasn't, and I missed him. (laughs) It took a few days before the people in my new outfit here found out that I wasn't as skilled as they were, and they just kind of told me to stay out of the way. So I would march down to the motor pool with a book in my jacket, and I'd sit inside the PC area and read and stay out of their way. Eventually the opportunity came when the company was about to have a GI inspection. One of the clerks there was leaving, and the first sergeant realized that he was going to have a little difficulty passing a GI inspection.

DePue: A GI meaning…?

Bowen: This is general—

DePue: General inspectors?

Bowen: Yeah, general inspectors come in, and typically it's somebody very high rank; it might even be the general that runs the base. The books had to be in order (laughs) as well as the troops and inventory. The whole fitness of the company was at stake. [It included] whether or not we had done all the things we were supposed to do to be ready for our mission, [did we] have the equipment that was [supposed to be] there, and were people trained on the equipment, knowing how to use it and how to apply it and be efficient at doing these kind of things.

DePue: So this is a very comprehensive inspection.

Bowen: Yes.

DePue: It's not just somebody going through the barracks and the arms room and the motor pool, but it's looking at all the records and evaluating training as well?

Bowen: Yes, evaluating training as well. This is not where you're standing at parade rest where they see if your belt buckle is shined and your shoes are shined. This goes beyond that, farther in depth, that you had the right equipment for your mission and that people knew how to use it and were trained properly on it and documentation that the training did take place and the person could be proficient at doing that.

DePue: Most of that part of the inspection, though, was by reviewing the company's paperwork?

Bowen: Yeah, reviewing the company's paperwork.

DePue: That's where you come in.

Bowen: And that's where I came in. They found out, I guess, with my background, I could type and had a background in accounting and office work. He thought he could do me a favor and get me out of the motor pool, and he put me in the office.

DePue: Is that how you viewed it?

Bowen: You know, I just felt like I had to put my time in, and I was going to make the best of whatever spot they put me in. I had long since basically decided that this Army's too big for me to fight; I'm going to make the best of it. (laughs) So I came in the office and I did what I could to make sure that we could pass. As a matter of fact, my first sergeant, I found out later, had been a long career

person, but I'm not sure if he even finished high school. I didn't realize how much he was dependent upon me to help him get to the point where he thought he needed to be in order to pass his inspection. And of course, once you pass it, you have to continue to pass it, so (laughs) it's a constant kind of thing that you have to keep up on.

DePue: Well, having spent quite a few years in the Army myself and getting ready for IG inspections and those kind of things—I don't know how to delicately ask you this—but was everything on the up-and-up in terms of what you were putting down in the books?

Bowen: (laughs) Well if you promise me you're not going to put me up for charges… (laughter)

DePue: You're way beyond that, Rich.

Bowen: I hope the statute of limitations has run out. (laughs) We had documented some things that, as you say, just weren't true. It was true on paper, but the event really didn't take place. Some of the things that we had to show was that everybody was supposed to be physically fit and able to meet physical requirements in terms of how many pushups you could do, how fast you could run a mile within a certain time limit, and to demonstrate that people in the company were physically fit and had the required training. It also demonstrated whether or not you had X number of people that could break down and operate certain types of military weapons that were assigned to the company—of course, the M-60s and certain weapons on the tank that we had. We were constantly coming up short, so you typically would hear the first sergeant say, "Who else would you like to be qualified on this?" (laughter) So we would back-date some paperwork indicating that certain people had taken the test and that this is what the score was, and now they were qualified to do this. But fortunately, I think he did make some kind of effort—because I was able to bring it to his attention that we don't have people qualified in these areas. Of course, sometimes their training came a lot later, much later than the actual score or the test that they had actually done on paper, (laughs) or either they made sure that somebody else was able to tutor those people to have some kind of skills at it.

DePue: Were there some perks that went along with being the company clerk?

Bowen: Yeah, I didn't have to go out in that cold (laughter) down to the motor pool. That was one of the perks. Also, I was able to find out information usually a lot sooner and probably with less rumors attached to it. Also I began to figure out, too, how certain things worked. And we paid in cash, and typically we did that once a month, and—

DePue: You mean the entire company got paid in cash?

Bowen: Yes, yes.

DePue: So payday was a big day, I would think.

Bowen: It was a big day. It was a big day. That's one of the few times that somebody in the company had arms that were loaded. (laughs) Later on, some people in the company began wanting to borrow money from me, and I could make sure that I got paid, because I was part of the payroll team that made sure everybody got paid off, so at the end of the line, I'd get my pay. (laughter) I didn't have to chase people down if I loaned somebody some money. It was amazing the people who came up short at the end of the month and the people that couldn't handle their paycheck.

DePue: Did your name appear less on duty rosters as well?

Bowen: Yes, (laughs) you bet it did, because I made up the roster. (laughter) Typically, if I had special reports to get out, I had a nice excuse from the first sergeant as to why I didn't have to do my duty at that specific time. But we still were supposed to do some guard duty out in some little isolated places. Speaking of that, I do have one incident I wanted to share with you about my—and I think it was discrimination in the military. It wasn't the military; I put it on the Red Cross. I had an aunt to die while I was in Germany. I wanted to come home to the funeral services. During that time period, you had to get the Red Cross's permission. We didn't have regular phones in the company, so you had to go to like a central source, and they would reach an overseas operator, and eventually be able to call back home. I figured out when the arrangements were going to be and see if I could get permission to come home. I probably could have gotten the flight, but the Red Cross wouldn't give me permission to come home. Their explanation to me was that, she's dead, there's nothing you can do for her, so you might as well stay here. What was disappointing to me was that one month prior, one of the other people in the company I think from New York, had a relative pass away, and not only did they let him go home, but they paid for it. I had my own money; I just wanted permission to leave. I just thought that was kind of a blow, and I have not felt that highly of the Red Cross since. I have since talked with other GIs from different American Legion posts and found out that was a very common practice, that they didn't let people of color travel like that. I just thought it was a one-time incident, which was with me, and it turned out it was pretty well widespread during that time period.

DePue: Well, I know that they had an attitude about how close the relatives were, too, that that had something to do with the determination of whether a person was able to get the Red Cross support to go home.

Bowen: Yeah. They had rules, but I felt I was within those rules. You just couldn't go for a friend or your third cousin removed or something like that. I did fit the guidelines, but for some reason, they didn't want to give me permission to leave.

DePue: You talked about Grafenwöhr, which any American soldier ever stationed in Germany knows about Grafenwöhr, and Wildflecken, which is another major base. Were those right there on the border, or were they somewhat removed?

Bowen: Right there near the border. There was a lot of activity going on there, and when you have both—we had trained on how to call in air support, we trained on how to identify certain hills, elevations, on maps so that if we had to take a strong position, where it might be. And we learned how to use the countryside to forage for food, water supplies, and so forth that was there. So we did a lot with—at least my side of it—maps and understanding what kinds of terrain we were in. Because I think if you can kind of remember, even way back to Napoleon, some of the things that defeated a lot of great warriors were the weather and [not] being able to feed the troops. So we had to really deal with that part of it. I can remember how morale would go down if people didn't get fed (laughter) at certain intervals, if the chuck wagon was two, three hours late bringing the food in, how people would really get down, or if it was two or three hours late and cold. That didn't sit too well with a lot of people. They just enjoyed sitting around and complaining, and they could find a lot to complain about.

DePue: Just like any army. Here's a question you might not have expected: What was your favorite C-ration, and what was your least-favorite C-ration?

Bowen: I believe—what do they call that stuff? Is it beef in a can? There was some kind of—there was a sort of thin film of orange I guess broth that was on the top of it, and—

DePue: Was it solidified, or was it—it's kind of a lard?

Bowen: Yes, it's kind of… But, since I was usually there close to the command centers that were temporarily set up, we normally always had some kind of equipment running, and so we'd put our cans on the motor and heat it up. (laughs) So ours was probably a little bit better than most, because most of the guys who were out in the field couldn't set a fire because it would be too visible at any given distance and give your place away. Our meals for the most part were warmed by the motor of either a tank or a PC or the colonel's G-50(??).

DePue: Did you get any training in demolitions?

Bowen: Yes.

DePue: Were you more adept at demolitions than you were at maintenance work?

Bowen: I had a lot of respect (laughter) for demolition, and I realized that this is life or death, and you only get one mistake dealing with this demolition stuff. Half of that is landmine warfare. On the demolition part of it, we had to learn about blasting caps and wiring and plastic explosives. Part of our job was to blow

up bridges to stop the advancement of the Russians if they decided to come over the border with their tanks and people. Also, we could blow buildings into the street in order to stop or slow down the advancement. What was amazing is you have to have some kind of idea about how certain things are built and to be able to make a three-, four-story building fall the way you want it to fall. You have to be able to hit the right support beams correctly in order to get it to behave with the explosion.

DePue: Well, Rich, you talked with a little bit more affection about this demolitions work than you ever did about the maintenance side of things, so I'm going to make an assumption that that was a little bit more interesting for you.

Bowen: Yeah, it was really, really interesting. I think the first day of training—and this is not in Fort Leonard Wood, the first initial training—the trainer had this plastic explosive around his neck shaped in the form of sausages, and he proceeded to point out a very valuable lesson for us, to light one of the plastic explosives with a cigarette lighter. Of course, several other GIs and I decided to back up, (laughter) and that was the lesson we found out, that this is not going to blow up unless you're able to put a blasting cap on it. If you put too much, you could blast yourself away. You also have to be able to set some type of timing to get yourself some distance between the explosion and the time that you want it to detonate. We were trained in terms of how fast that action may be based upon the type of line that we used.

DePue: I want to change gears here now and kind of start with going back again to when you actually got to Germany. This is late '67, so you're going to be there for basically the rest of your three-year tour.

Bowen: Right. Two-year tour.

DePue: I'm sorry, two-year tour.

Bowen: Don't give me another year! (laughter)

DePue: But that takes you well into '68 or towards the end of…

Bowen: Yeah, '68.

DePue: Boy, those were interesting times in the United States, and it was an interesting time in Vietnam at the same time, so that's the context that we've got. You've brought in something—you have obviously done some homework here, Rich, and I'm going to let you kind of take a look at the public opinion as it related to the war, and we've got a month-by-month breakdown on that.

Bowen: What was happening is I didn't get copies of what was called the *Overseas Weekly*, I believe. It was an overseas newspaper that basically the GIs—or the *Army Times*—that we ended up reading. [confusing – which one did you read? Please clarify] It seems like it was full of negative things that were

going on back home. When they would have polls, it seemed to bring down the public opinion about support of the war. It was obvious that public opinion just was falling in terms of the Vietnam War. We started seeing in the newspaper riots on college campuses again. And of course, you're away from home. You know some of these campuses where some of these activities are taking place. We were also beginning to see demonstrations basically in the South, and blacks were involved in that—lunch counter sit-downs—and I think also Dr. Martin Luther King went to Cicero and also had a very difficult time there. I think he indicated that the people in Cicero were a lot tougher on the movement than even some of those real southerners in Mississippi. So we began to see that there were people who really were entrenched in fighting. So the war in Vietnam was taking place, and the civil rights struggle was really—at the time, of course, we didn't know it was peaked out, but it was a real struggle in terms of different leaders who were doing certain kinds of things differently, but Dr. King seemed to be the top in terms of African-American leaders. And of course there was…

DePue: I wonder if we can take it event-by-event in 1968. So by the beginning of 1968, you'd been in Germany for a few months, you've got your feet firmly on the ground, I suspect, by that time. You're well-entrenched as the company clerk, one of the more important guys—at least to the first sergeant—to the company. But the year of 1968 starts, at least, you know, at the national attention level, with the Tet Offensive in Vietnam, and suddenly it looks like a war that we were being told we were winning looked like, Holy cow, it doesn't look like we're winning this thing at all. Now, I'm going to ask you, in the context of what you were thinking when you heard this and what was the morale of the troops that you were living with and working with on a daily basis.

Bowen: Well, I think during the time of the Tet Offensive, we were hearing news like we might have to pack up and go over there anytime.

DePue: "Over there"?

Bowen: Yeah, Vietnam. So we were thinking that—and that's the reason why I think it was so important that McNamara's one hundred thousand project, turned out to be the two hundred thousand. The [first] hundred thousand came along during the time I was in basic training and doing my AIT, but he requested another hundred thousand, which was a two hundred thousand, I think during his Tet Offensive, trying to get more people in order to resupply the personnel commands throughout Vietnam.

DePue: And this would have been a time, then, also, that the troop levels in Vietnam kept going up and up?

Bowen: Troop levels going up, and also it seemed like every time somebody finished basic, they just went straight to Vietnam as soon as they finished basic. In

some cases, they didn't even do an AIT; my understanding was they just went straight into combat.

DePue: Was there some talk at the time that maybe this would be a time when the Soviets would try to take advantage of the situation and attack as well?

Bowen: Yes, yes. See, we were thinking that if we pull too many troops out, then that might be an opportunity for them to go in. This is a cold war, when the Russians were—we just didn't trust them during that time period. We knew that they probably would take advantage of any situation that might give them an advantage. That's the reason why we thought if they decided to move at any time that we would have a very tough mission to fulfill.

DePue: What were you guys being told of the expected invasion routes if the Soviets were to pull the trigger?

Bowen: We were stationed not that far from the border, and our job was to get there and slow them down and keep them from coming across.

DePue: Was Grafenwöhr the place that a lot of people thought they were going to be coming across?

Bowen: Yeah, Grafenwöhr. I really believe some of that training that we did was to demonstrate that we did have some muscle and that maybe you shouldn't try this because we do have a certain amount of people and forces here. We would usually have a lot of ordinance during that time we were in training, and I'm sure they heard and observed that we were going through these exercises and going to be ready for anything that may take place.

DePue: The next event is going to be a different kind of thing altogether, but equally as traumatic, I would think. April fourth, Martin Luther King is assassinated.

Bowen: That was some time there that I think the lieutenants and first sergeants thought there could possibly even be riots even on base. As far as I know, nothing like that ever took place.

DePue: What would you say was the percentage of blacks in your particular company?

Bowen: Very small. I think it was probably—numbers might have been two hundred total for my company and maybe twenty to thirty people of color there.

DePue: Okay. Was that typical for most of the units in Germany?

Bowen: I think it's very typical, yeah.

DePue: Okay. Now, obviously, in your position, you're pretty close to the company commander and the first sergeant and all, but were you getting feedback from

some of the other African-American troops about how they felt about King being assassinated?

Bowen: Some of them I think really did feel very close to that. I think two or three of them had gone to his parents' church and I think one or two more were from Georgia. I know a couple of those young men were from those areas that King talked about in his speeches. So they've had some closeness to him. But fortunately, they were not the militant type of individuals and they were able to kind of keep a lid on things. Nothing, far as I know, ever really got out of hand.

DePue: The Army at that time, though, did have a strong tradition of a southern influence, if you will. A lot of the senior NCOs, a lot of the officer corps—a higher percentage than you would normally think, were coming from southern states. Was there some real racial tension going on at the time?

Bowen: They seemed to handle it well—because they had enough force there to keep most things in line. You're right about most of the officers had some southern background, and I think to some extent, they may not have treated everybody fair or—but you just didn't know whether or not it was racial or not or whether they were trying just to make an example out of certain people. They didn't have much sympathy in their conversation about it, but on the other hand, what could they do? They weren't there stateside to do anything about it, so they could just make remarks. But a lot of them didn't make that many remarks. They seemed to stay away from that.

DePue: Was there any of the leadership that was African-American?

Bowen: There were some sergeants that were African-American, and I was a noncommissioned officer, —E-3, -4. But there were E-5s and -6s in the company.

DePue: E-5 being a sergeant; E-6 being a staff sergeant.

Bowen: Mm-hmm.

DePue: Okay. The next one—and this wasn't too much later—we're talking about an election year, of course, and fairly early in that year, Lyndon Johnson announces, to everybody's surprise, that he's not going to be running for reelection, which kind of opens up the Democratic Party as well. And it looked like Bobby Kennedy was doing great things until he was assassinated June sixth in California. Did that have an impact in what was going on in your unit and your experience?

Bowen: Fortunately, I was in a training—at a resort in Lake Icy [Eschenbach?] during the time that Robert Kennedy got killed. When Kennedy was killed, I was in a hotel, and people in the hotel found out that I was an American, and a lot of people stopped by either in my room or outside and just wanted to chat with

me and ask me some questions that I really couldn't answer. I really didn't have answers for them. One of the ones that still stays with me today is, "Why does America kill all its good leaders?" How come we couldn't figure out some other way to settle our differences? And of course, at this time, I didn't know who killed him—all we basically were able to see is that he was killed at the hotel in California, but we really weren't aware of any big conspiracy or anything like that that may have caused him to get killed in that situation. We were eventually able to read more—this is weeks, months later—because at that time, we didn't get a lot of information that quickly. (laughs) But eventually we figured out that it was a lone gunman, Sirhan Sirhan, but that didn't come out immediately.

DePue: The next one I wanted to ask you about—you were much closer to the epicenter in that one—and that's the Soviets' invasion of Czechoslovakia in August.

Bowen: That happened in the midst of a young man named Baker and I getting a top-secret clearance. We wanted to get to East Berlin just to see it before our clearance became final. So we got busy and tried to speed up the process, but in the meantime, it was on again, off again, as to whether or not we could cross the border to get into the east side and see the city. When they invaded, it really brought a lot of attention because we were on a different state of readiness at the time. We basically were sleeping "ready-roll", meaning to be able to roll out at any time, because we didn't know where this was going to go or what kind of reaction we were going to have to take to this event.

We were able to get into East Germany, but had we had the top-secret clearance, they wouldn't have allowed us to go. If we were detained, we may have had information that the Russians would want to squeeze out of us. And, of course, without having a top-secret clearance, we probably didn't have access to anything that they would want or that they didn't already know. So we were able to get to Berlin to see it. The city of Berlin at the time was like a display city that the Americans, the English, the Italians, and all the Allies had put a lot of money into rebuilding. It was one of the focal points of the war [WWII] where a lot of fighting had taken place. The city ended up getting divided; the Russians had one half of it and the Allies had the other half. The Russians, for whatever reason—probably either they didn't have the money or the resources, but they hadn't done anything to rebuild the East German side. There were buildings that were still partly in ruins, that never had been either torn down or rebuilt. There were bullet holes still in the buildings from this time period. Once you got on the east side, you began to realize how few resources there were. Very few bikes, very few automobiles there. If you did see vehicles, most of them were civil defense vehicles. You begin to realize that outside of maybe like a ten, twelve-story apartment building, you see only one car, maybe a dozen or so bikes with motors on them, and then hundreds of bicycles. So you didn't see wealth at all.

What was amazing is the effort people would go through in order to escape from the east side to get to west. When you were able to look at the wall and see what they had to do to get to the wall, let alone try to get over the wall—there was sand, which if anybody know anything about running on sand, you really can't run that fast; and then there were land mines in the sand; and then there was barbed wire; and then there were steel railroad beams that were there to stop somebody from getting over with a vehicle. If you made it to the wall without a guard shooting you, then you had to climb the wall, and at the top of the wall was broken glass in concrete along the top of the wall. So when you start reading stories where so-and-so escaped from the east and went to west and realize what all they had to go through in order to accomplish this task, you know, things had to be awful, awful bad to motivate them to take that kind of risk. I began to have a new appreciation for the people who did escape that wall.

DePue: Did you have a new appreciation of the difference between capitalism and communism? I mean, you mentioned yourself that this is in the height of the Cold War as well as Vietnam going on. Did you get a new sense of that ideological combat as well?

Bowen: Yes. It was really kind of obvious just seeing the bright lights, the big city of West Berlin, the amount of commerce, the wealth that people had—you know, driving nice cars, the way that they dressed. Even the dress, the appearance of people, [in East Berlin] you could just tell that this is Old World–style clothing - there was nothing fancy about it and was possibly even hand-me-downs and stuff like that that people were wearing.

DePue: Did you actually get into East Berlin, then?

Bowen: Yeah, we were in East Berlin. I think we spent two days in East Berlin.

DePue: Really? Were you escorted during that time?

Bowen: Yes, we—

DePue: Was this a small group or what?

Bowen: This was a tour, so we had to stay with the bus, and we were able to get out at certain points, go into churches. We went through Checkpoint Charlie. Matter of fact, no, we only spent one day there. One day—sorry—one day.

DePue: What was it like going through Checkpoint Charlie?

Bowen: It was sort of like maybe I've been here before, (laughs) because I'd seen pictures of it before. I think it was also in some of these spy movies with 007… When I was able to see Checkpoint Charlie, I was like, Wow, is this all there is to it? It really wasn't that much—it was a guard tower and a narrow street that you had to go through to get there. But once you got through

Checkpoint Charlie, there was really not that much traffic, you didn't see that many people on the street. We were told that people didn't trust each other, and as a result, you didn't see people stopping, talking to each other on the streets like you do in the U.S. or other places, because they didn't know what the other person might go back and tell the government about what the person said or didn't say. The person might be visited by people representing the government and never be seen again.

DePue: Did you go far enough into East Berlin to get away from the wall and actually see what you think it probably was actually like, then?

Bowen: We got away from the wall and were able to see some civic buildings. That was probably the only buildings you were able to see that really looked kind of modern. There were churches that were really big and grand prior to World War II, and you could see that they just had not been kept up. But they're doing church services. You'd see that a church that may have held somewhere in the neighborhood of two, three thousand people, only maybe four people would be inside the building, so it kind of let you know that they just didn't support religion as well. I was able to see how some of the monuments were maintained—there's one picture that you can probably see—is the soldier sort of protecting the unknown soldier.

DePue: Was that an East German soldier?

Bowen: This is an East German soldier. They didn't have the parade kind of somberness to it that we normally put to ours; it's somebody just standing there at attention with his rifle. We had two young ladies on the tour that we didn't know, but they seemed to be fairly friendly and able to talk to this guard in his language. They were able to get him to crack his facial expression, (laughter) so… But I doubt if anything like that could happen to—when we talk about our Unknown Soldier performance that we normally do. But that was some of the things that I remember about East Berlin.

When you looked from the west, looking east, you could find that there were a lot of buildings that only the side that faced the west was repaired. Once you got over to the east side and looked at the same building, you realized that it hadn't been finished; all that was done was the façade that faced west. Eventually, when we heard that when Ronald Reagan kind of broke up the Cold War and the wall came tumbling down, you could just say to yourself, It was about time.

We ended up taking a couple chunks off the wall. My friend Baker, who was from Canada, took a chunk off the wall, because we felt like we could go close enough to the wall where the guards couldn't see over it, and we could chip away at a piece of it.

DePue: You did this while you were there in 1968?

Bowen: Yes, yes.

DePue: Wow.

Bowen: Yeah.

DePue: But not in direct sight of any East German or Soviet guards, I take it.

Bowen: Right, right.

DePue: Well, that's kind of a gutsy thing to do, wasn't it?

Bowen: Yes. (laughter) We figured if we could get a souvenir and take a piece of this wall, at least it might make it weaker, (laughs) it might make it fall down quicker. If you looked at the wall, you found out it was made out of—that was another thing that kind of was disappointing to me, it was made out of debris, cinderblocks and things that were—you didn't see hardly a new block at all. These were basically buildings that had been bombed or torn out or something like that, and this was what the wall was made out of—junk. (laughs) We had a plan. Our plan was to get a piece of the wall, and Baker was to get up there and get his piece first. We were going to pretend like we were tourists taking pictures. Baker had the camera first, and I was up at the wall initially, and I'd gotten a piece. Baker didn't know how to operate my camera as well as I did, so while he was sitting there trying to get in position so he could do that, the guard tower is probably at least fifty yards—maybe twenty yards, thirty yards away, and pretty elevated up, but we knew that the guard could not see over this wall. And so I had gotten my piece of the rock, had put it in my pocket, and it was my turn to take pictures of him or waste some time while he gets his piece of the rock. Finally I'm just playing with the camera, going different directions, and I said, "Baker, don't look now, but walk away real slow. (laughs) The guards have their weapons pointed at us." By this time, I think he had gotten his piece of the rock, and we just kind of walked away real slow like we weren't doing anything, we were just tourists. (laughs) I think we spent too much time there, which raised their suspicions. But we did get pictures of the wall and each one of us at the wall, and we did get our souvenirs. It's in my footlocker at home, and I'm sure if anybody else looked at that rock they would say, "What in the world is this trash here?" and probably would throw it out. But I kept it as a souvenir.

DePue: Well now if they listen to this story, they'll know exactly why that's important to you. Okay, the next event here in '68, and this is right on the heels—they're happening practically the same time—the Democratic convention in Chicago in 1968, which anybody who lived during that time remembers the event. What was going on in Germany at that time? How was it received by the troops?

Bowen: We didn't get very much news, and if we did get it, it was typically late—a week late, or at least four or five days late. Of course, being from Illinois, we

were really concerned about what was going on in Chicago. And what in the world was going on that we had to turn the horses and the police loose on American citizens for protesting the war and trying to disrupt the Democratic convention? And of course, Mayor Daley taking a hard line to this—you know, Not in my city. (laughter) It just made us kind of feel like, What in the world is going on back home? And how long can this kind of disruption be? This war was definitely not something that we were feeling that good about, because everybody at home seemed to be up in arms about it. This is also during the time period that the numbers in the polls are dropping as to the popularity of the war.

DePue: Yeah, you've got the numbers here that you brought in yourself. You know, August '65, the percentage who agreed with the war, 61 percent. About the time you got to Germany, that had dropped to 44 percent. That's a huge drop. By August '68, it's down to 35 percent and headed south from there. So you guys are in the Army in the midst of a very unpopular war, and as you said yourself, there's all kinds of craziness going on back home.

Bowen: Yeah, it was real crazy back home. You just didn't know if this kind of thing was going to be going on when you got back or was it just the one-time event. The trend was it seemed like it was always popping up someplace, on some college campus or, in this case, the city of Chicago. We're talking about major riots and hundreds of people getting put in jail and in some cases even getting killed during this time period.

DePue: How would you characterize your own feelings about the protesters in Chicago and other places, student protestors especially? Were you sympathetic? Were you angry about them? How would you characterize that?

Bowen: You know, I didn't feel angry about it. I guess I sort of felt removed from them, because I wasn't there. I didn't know anybody that was there, and I just felt like, Why are they that worked up over this? I couldn't understand that part of it. Why could somebody be that worked up to put themselves in that much harm's way? I knew that the people that were fighting the wars didn't have much choice but to be a part of putting themselves into harm's way. But people felt that strongly about it at home were really making you—even, I think the best of us—have some doubts about whether or not we want to stay in, or do we just come out? I think had we felt differently, you probably would have had more people wanting to reenlist. In my situation, I just wanted to get on with my life. You know, I want to do my time and get out of there and hopefully get back to something that was considered to be normal.

DePue: What was the nature of the barracks talk at the time? Were there arguments about the war going on in the barracks? Were there people talking about, I'm going to go AWOL, that kind of thing?

Bowen: Not so much when I was in Germany. We had that in basic training. We'd have people who tried to go AWOL in Fort Leonard Wood. But the way they brought you in at Fort Leonard Wood, you'd have to be sort of a person who's really trained to figure out the way to get out of there. (laughter) Fort Leonard Wood was really a awful, awful big place, and it was set up in such a way that if you didn't have transportation, you were just not going to be able to get out of there. Now, several people who tried to go AWOL got caught before they could get away because they couldn't figure out how to get out. (laughter)

One of the things that was odd: In the company I was in, they would have people who would do their tour in Vietnam, come to our company, get so frustrated with the peacetime way of doing things that they would reenlist to go back to Vietnam. It didn't create any trend for any of us who were there, because we felt like, If that's what you want to do, you go ahead. We know that they're killing people in Vietnam. If you want to go back and take that just kind of chance just because somebody is telling you to make your bed up and shine your shoes—

DePue: Was that the kind of thing they were upset about, was the…?

Bowen: They were upset about that. They were also upset about the way some of the people in charge of the military at that time, southerners I guess, [were treating them, because] they felt like they were probably getting picked on or thought that they should be cut some slack, so they would just leave rather than stay around in that situation.

Now I, just getting near the end, started trying to read enough things to figure out, How can I put myself in some type of advantage? So I start looking at seeing if I could get out early, and I found out you could get out early if you had a hardship or if you had a chance to go back to school. So I ended up writing letters to get out of the military a few days early in order to get back to school.

DePue: Were you concerned that you might end up going to Vietnam, or the timing of your tour of service, you weren't really concerned about that?

Bowen: Well, it never left you, even though there was—I think they were saying at the time you had to have at least [or less than?] six months left for them not to bother you, to send you back to Vietnam. So I had not finished my tour there [in Germany], but there's no reason why they couldn't have allowed me to finish my tour in Vietnam. But since I had gotten to the point that I was beyond [within?] that six months [or less], they usually didn't like to send you into that area unless you had at least six months [or more left]. So I started trying to see what I could do to get out a few days early to go back to school. They called it an "early out," but you could get out up to ninety days [early]—I think I got out of maybe less than a month early from my military service. And that required quite a bit of writing to do that. Of course, in the meantime,

my first sergeant is trying to put pressure on me to reenlist. (laughter) He found it very difficult to let it go that I didn't want to stay in that nice job he had given me and keep the company records and keep the commanding general off of him.

DePue: Well, you're pretty important to him by that time. Was there any talk to you about possibly going to Officer Candidate School?

Bowen: Yeah, he asked me to do that, and I had already thought most of this stuff through by the time he ever approached me with some of it. But that meant that I had to reenlist, and probably looking at giving the Army I think at that time at least another four to six years, and I just wasn't willing to do that at the time. I was only willing to give them what they had requested me to give them, (laughs) which was those two years.

DePue: You've talked about the morale that was going on at the time. Were there discipline problems? I mean, this was the time period, increasingly, for the troops in Vietnam where there are serious problems with drug abuse, alcohol, with increasing tensions for racial relations. Was any of that going on from what you could see in the army in Germany at the time?

Bowen: On base through the week it looked like a normal community. You didn't see any outbursts of racial tension, and you didn't see anybody that appeared to have any drug problems. However, on the weekend, you found that there were people who found some way to get high, either through alcohol or some form of drugs. I guess if a person wanted it, they could find it. I know that there was one group in the company that would sort of lock themselves in the room most of the weekend and smoke pot. Most of the officers and the staff sergeant were usually not around on the weekends. They [the men] would cleverly take the screw out of the doorknob so if somebody pulled on it to try to get in, it would fall apart, (laughs) and it would take somebody some time to go to headquarters to get tools like a screwdriver and a replacement screw to get the door open. By that time they'd have had enough time to clear the room and do that thing [what thing?]. But this was just some of the people that lived in my room, and this is the reason why I took those USO tours, because I didn't want to be a part of it. And I left.

They would ask me periodically, Did I want to participate, and I told them no for a long time, and they were, Oh, you think you're better than we are. I said, "No, I got something else to do. I'll be back." (laughs) So I went from "No" to "I'll be back." I'd leave and go on a tour and come back. Eventually, I think about a week or two before I got ready to leave [end of service?], one of them says, "You know, you're not coming back, are you?" I said, "You finally figured it out." (laughter) But I don't think they ever got caught and were ever put on the carpet for doing drugs.

DePue: Were the guys who were rotating in from Vietnam more or less likely to get involved in that kind of stuff?

Bowen: I think the ones that were there—I didn't see them getting involved in that, because one, they were getting frustrated sooner, and they would leave and go back. I think it probably took some type of learning curve to figure out where you could find the drugs first. I'm sure you just didn't ask anybody. But somehow there seemed to be somebody able to get hold of it.

DePue: How about any racial tensions? Was there some of that going on?

Bowen: They seemed to have kept it separated enough, but it still took place. I was one of those kind of individuals that could see it happening ahead of time and was able to try to avoid it. I know one of my first run-ins with one of the guys on base, another black soldier—we had talked all week about going down to town on the weekend, and I was going to go off base with him. I thought he was an okay person. We hadn't been downtown probably ten minutes—we were just kind of walking around—and he asked a white soldier to give him a light, and the person did, and while he was giving him a light, he hit him. And I said just, "Why'd you do that?" And he gave me some crazy excuse. I said, "Hey, listen, man, I'm through with you. I didn't come this far to get put in jail, to get caught up in some craziness of yours," and I never went with him anyplace after that.

DePue: This was your black friend, your buddy, who hit somebody else?

Bowen: Yeah, yeah.

DePue: Hit the guy who gave him a light?

Bowen: Yeah, yeah, for no reason. For no reason. Because I asked him later, "Did you know this guy, or had you had some encounters before?" "No, he would have did the same thing to me"—that was his explanation. So after that, I stayed away from him. I did not go downtown with any of them, I either went by myself or someplace else. I begin to realize too that those bars down there, you kind of knew your place. If I took you into the Ebony Bar, both of us would have to fight our way out, and if you took me into the Hillbilly Bar, we'd have to fight our way out of that one. So as a result, if we worked together on post all week, you just go on down to the Hillbilly Bar and I go to the Ebony Bar and we just, you know, come back the next week. I was surprised that there were bars with those actual names. I thought it was a joke. (laughter)

DePue: Was there a third choice, one where both people could go to?

Bowen: No, at least I never found it. (laughter)

DePue: Well, when we did the pre-interview session, I think you mentioned to me something about a Klan mailing list as well.

Bowen: Yeah. And that's the reason why I knew that some of those guys, those southern officers that were in leadership positions—if you just looked at their activity alone, you would probably say, There's probably no intent in this. But when you start putting together the fact that they're receiving Klan literature, you began to be real suspicious of their activity and how they're treating people. Since I handled the mail, I knew who was on this list, (laughs) who was getting this kind of information. So I really became quite suspicious of certain people in the company and basically tried to stay [clear(??)] of them.

DePue: Okay. You've already spent a lot of time here—you mentioned several times about getting on the USO tours, and you went into great detail—which was one of the parts I really wanted to hear about—going into Berlin, both West and East Berlin. But I wanted you to talk a little bit more about your experiences on the USO tours, and let's start with your buddy who went with you on most of these trips. Tell us a little bit more about him. What was his name, again?

Bowen: You know, I'm going to have to look up—I know his last name was Baker, and Baker was a Canadian, and for some reason, somebody had told him that he could speed up his American citizenship if he became a U.S. soldier, and that's what he was trying to do. He had enlisted for four years in the U.S. Army.

DePue: With the hope of going to Vietnam, maybe?

Bowen: I don't know if Vietnam was on his list of places to go or not, but for some reason he thought his citizenship would be speeded up if he was an American soldier. We just kind of hit it off well, and we did quite a few things together, had quite a few things in common that we had done, shared. He was one of the people that everybody in the company kind of thought that was a little different, and also kidded him all the time about, Why did you do this? (laughs) What were you thinking? So he got ribbed a lot about that, and, of course, Canada at this point in time did not have a high profile of sending troops to Vietnam. But I think he really had a potential of actually being sent to Vietnam. I don't know whatever happened to him after all that, but I got a feeling he probably stayed there and rotated out.

DePue: This USO tour you took to Berlin, that was by no means the only USO trip you took, was it?

Bowen: No, no, this wasn't. I've been to Rottenburg, which at that time was one of the oldest cities in Europe. During World War II, it had been off limits for bombing because of the historical significance of the city. We have pictures of Baker someplace in my files where the nineteenth-century type of a city had

doorways that were probably like five feet high, and here we are, both about six feet, and we're at least a foot taller than the door. It was kind of odd seeing different cities throughout Europe and what certain people's backgrounds were.

DePue: What was your impression of the German people and the German countryside?

Bowen: They seemed to be very resourceful people. One of the things I noticed after a short period of time is that there was a group of people in their forties, fifties, you didn't see because so many of them died during the war. And then a lot of the older men who would have been my dad's age either walked with a limp where they'd been shot and my tailor who used to do a lot of sewing and stuff for us, that worked there on the base, he was one of those kind of guys that would have been there during World War II. I never did ask him, you know, why he had that limp, but I had a feeling he probably was shot during the war or injured in some kind of way.

DePue: Some of those older gentlemen probably saw two wars.

Bowen: Yes, yes.

DePue: Did they treat you well?

Bowen: Treated me well. Every once in a while—you'd have to be careful not to get yourself into any trouble, because he noticed that I didn't smoke, and he asked me to give him some cigarettes, and I did, and I realized I did something wrong. I was not supposed to be trading cigarettes with any of the German nationals, and as soon as I realized that, I didn't do it anymore. (laughs)

DePue: Was that—

Bowen: I only did it that one time, and—

DePue: Was that a ration-controlled item, cigarettes?

Bowen: I think it was.

DePue: What else would have been controlled?

Bowen: I would imagine probably sugar, coffee. But I know cigarettes seemed to be on that list. Also, they wanted us not to spend so much money on the German economy because they were trying to shore up the dollar during this time period. That's when they were giving us money to save money. They were giving us a 10 percent return on our money if we would set it aside in some form of allotment so we wouldn't spend it there on the economy. As a result, I didn't spend a lot of money on the economy because I realized, this is a good deal. (laughs)

DePue: What'd you think of the German food?

Bowen: It took some getting used to. (laughs) The doughnuts that you see in a window shop, you go in and you think you're getting an American doughnut, and it looked like an American doughnut, but it sure didn't taste like one, because you wondered, What happened to the sugar? There was no sugar in this doughnut. (laughs) Also the way they processed food, too—it was not unusual to see a pig in the window with an apple in its mouth, and the skin of the pig is dark because of the way it was cured. If you wanted meat, you just cut off a piece right there. Refrigeration was not as plentiful as it is here. They didn't refrigerate a lot of food; it was cured in a drying process. They didn't have coolers so you drunk your beer and wine hot, not cold. And the beer content was not 4 to 5 percent like it is here; it was somewhere close to 10 to 12, which is pretty close to the content of alcohol you find in today's wine.

DePue: Was this darker beer, ales and…?

Bowen: Darker beer, yeah. The GIs would find somebody new coming in and bet them that they couldn't drink three beers without getting loaded, and of course their ego would get them into trouble. (laughs)

DePue: Okay. Any other words about your experiences in Germany during this time before we get you back to the States again?

Bowen: We found out that the Germans would find some way to recycle a lot of our trash that we threw away and make something out of it. We always found the Autobahn was so different. I had read so much about it. There were no speed limits. German cars just passed us up, you know, at a very high rate of speed. That was sort of impressive in terms of seeing how fast the cars drove on the Autobahn.

DePue: All in all, did you enjoy your year and a half or so in Germany?

Bowen: I like to tell people I made the best of it. (laughter) I enjoyed the people, the country, seeing the differences, and just tried to learn as much as I could. I felt like there's one thing I wished I could have accomplished. I tried to learn German, and I took a class three times. Each time I took the class, I couldn't get any more than one or two classes in before they would send us out to the field. So I never could finish the class. I got to the point I could understand a lot more than I was able to speak or write, so that really helped me out, at least trying to figure out where I should go and keep myself out of trouble.

DePue: When did you come back to the States?

Bowen: I came back in December, and right before Christmas.

DePue: Of '68.

Bowen: Of '68. It was during the time period that GIs could fly standby and I was hoping to get home for Christmas. I believe I got home on the twenty-third—I think that's what the record says. It was interesting coming home during that time period because you just didn't know how you were going to be perceived, because you were still in the military, so you still had to wear your uniform. We were just concerned, after having read so much and heard about people getting killed and riots and shootings and incidents in Chicago. I was pleased to say I didn't run into any incidents trying to get home.

DePue: Assaults when you get off the airplane.

Bowen: Right, right.

DePue: None of that.

Bowen: None of that.

DePue: Were you discharged back at Fort Leonard Wood?

Bowen: No. Actually, I ended up having to come through Fort Dix, but I ended up coming back home, to Colp and had to report in to my duty station, Marion, Illinois, which is the county seat—and this is where the military draft clerk's office would have been, I was supposed to report in there I think within ten day—I believe that's what the rules were at the time—of my reporting home. Whatever day it was I selected—probably two or three days after Christmas—I reported in there, and the FBI was taking out the draft clerk in handcuffs at that time. I found out later that she had been receiving money to keep certain people from not going in the military, and others would have to pay the price of going in to fill the quota that the draft board had to fill. And of course, the draft board at the time, was sort of like that invisible kind of thing. It was there. It just existed; you don't know how it existed. Come to find out later that the draft boards, majority of them throughout the country, had few if any people of color on any draft boards, and I think that's what led to some draft boards getting themselves into trouble. Because they were doing some things that they shouldn't have been doing, which was taking money (laughs) for keeping certain people of influence out.

DePue: In retrospect, then, do you think that maybe you got drafted because of something like that?

Bowen: I believe I did, but hey, it's something I did, and I'm glad I did it, but I don't think I would have volunteered to do it.

DePue: What happened to you then, after your discharge? What were your plans from there?

Bowen: Immediately I was enrolled at SIU Carbondale. Finished that semester up—no, it was a quarter system, I think at that time. Finished that quarter up and went to grad school at Purdue that summer.

DePue: Well, I don't want to rush through southern Illinois too quickly, because I think something significant happened while you were there, didn't it?

Bowen: Well, hey, I'm—oh, yeah. On campus?

DePue: Yeah.

Bowen: Yeah. Old Main burned the week or two I think before the quarter was over.

DePue: That was June 8, 1969, on a Sunday.

Bowen: Yeah, and I had—

DePue: It wasn't just an accidental fire, was it?

Bowen: No. SIU Carbondale had a number of riots. They'd had the science building I think bombed. The fact that we had an ROTC program there made them a target because it was military. I had worked for the ROTC program when I was in undergrad school at Carbondale before I got in the military, basically passing out uniforms for the ROTC program. But on the third, fourth floor I think —one of the upper floors—they had bales of hay and targets on those bales of hay up there, and supposedly, according to the way the report went, somehow those bales of hay caught on fire, and that's what burned the building down so quickly. It was the oldest building on campus at the time it burned down.

DePue: So the initial reports were that it wasn't because of it being targeted by protestors?

Bowen: Well, I don't remember which came first at this point, but I do know there was some talk about was it an accident, was it because it was an old building, or did somebody really set this on fire? But given the climate of what had happened in the past, it was just really highly suspicious that somebody didn't help it along. There was a cannon in front of the building that pointed straight down Old Main, the main street, and they always had three or four cannonballs there. Four or five years earlier, I think, one of the fraternities decided they were going to set it off, and they did shoot a cannonball straight down Old Main Street—didn't hit anybody. So it had some history of activity going on there that probably shouldn't have.

DePue: What was it about Southern Illinois University—it's stuck in the middle of what's relatively a conservative area of the state—a Democratic but also fairly conservative—that made it one of the more hotbeds of protest in Illinois?

Bowen: Southern Illinois was a really, really growing college at the time. It was growing by leaps and bounds and was setting all kind of growth records during this time. Southern Illinois [University] was not populated by a lot of people from southern Illinois. So people came in from all over, and a lot of them came from major cities, and I think that's what brought different types of flavor and influence to campus. You had people from out east, you had people from Chicago. A lot of people from Chicago were down there on campus.

DePue: Yeah, it's as far away as you can get from Chicago and still be in the state.

Bowen: Yes, in terms of college. There are no colleges south of Carbondale, (laughter) unless you go to Missouri.

DePue: Well, in-state tuition. Yeah. Okay.

Bowen: So I think that was part of what happened at Carbondale. And we really did have a really large, diverse, population.

DePue: But you weren't there that long, you just said.

Bowen: No, I was there for that one… If you remember, before I went to the military, I tried to get a head of the household deferment and drop my 2-S, and that's when they snatched me up, and I only had one semester to go, so I ended up coming back, finishing that—I keep saying semester; it's a quarter system. Had one quarter to go, and so I came back, finished that quarter, and then that summer left for Purdue and entered Purdue that fall.

DePue: What was your intention, then, when you went to Purdue? What did you see your future being?

Bowen: I had seen enough (laughter) of the military and enough to make me grow up, to see life differently, and knew that I probably wasn't going to get a whole lot of chances to get this thing right. I ended up in a very serious graduate program. I think I went straight from undergrad to grad school. Emotionally, I probably couldn't have handled it, but because I had seen [life from] the military side of it, I knew that I had to roll up my sleeves and work hard to get through the program. That's what I did, and that's one of the motivations for me going to grad school. I wanted something different, and I wanted more out of my life. I could have gotten a job I think with McDonnell Douglas using some of my skills from the military, which is disarming bombs or working for some urban police department being a bomb squad person. I knew that I had something bigger and better to do than make one mistake (laughs) trying to disarm a bomb. (laughter)

DePue: What was the focus of your study, then, at Purdue?

Bowen: It was industrial management with a major in finance. It was a two-year program, and I was trying to figure out what I was going to do during this

time period. By the time I was ready to graduate, McNamara was head of the World Bank, and I even applied for the World Bank but ended up taking a job at the community college here in Springfield.

DePue: When did you get here to Springfield, then?

Bowen: Nineteen seventy-one.

DePue: At Lincoln Land Community College?

Bowen: Yes.

DePue: How old was Lincoln Land Community College at the time?

Bowen: Lincoln Land Community College got its charter in 1967, opened its doors 1968, and I think they started at Isles Park, Park Place(??) and then opened I think in '68 opened some temporary buildings beside the Heritage House, which is on South Sixth Street. So I came here basically three years after the temporary campus was set up.

DePue: What did you do when you were at the Lincoln Land? I mean, you spent the majority of your adult life working at Lincoln Land, right?

Bowen: Yeah, I did. I spent about eighteen years of that basically teaching accounting and business courses and later became—well, about twelve years of doing that, and then spent about the last eighteen being the department chair. So I was professor of accounting and business and then a department chair for business administration or business and public service—it depended on what phase of the reorganization we went through at the time.

DePue: Well, it was a growing place. It's certainly come a long way since 1971.

Bowen: I think when I came on board, they had less than a thousand students. I think by the time I left, it was over ten thousand students. And they start hiring people during the time—I think the 1970, '71, '72, '73, and '74, they were hiring anywhere from thirty to forty-five people at a time each year.

DePue: Somewhere in there you also got married.

Bowen: I got married right after I got back from the military. (laughter) I got married in 1969.

DePue: Was this somebody you knew before you left, then?

Bowen: Yes.

DePue: So you were corresponding while you were in Germany?

Bowen: Yeah, we were corresponding, sending letters back and forth. And we—

DePue: Well, let's start with her name, and then I'll turn it over to you.

Bowen: Name is Cleatia—C-l-e-a-t-i-a.

DePue: And last name?

Bowen: Her maiden name was Rafe, R-a-f-e. They lived almost across the street from us, and she went to the same high school that I went to and was brought up in the same community. We went to the same church. Really didn't do any dating through high school or grade school, none of that kind of stuff. It wasn't till a couple years before I got ready to leave to go to the military that we started dating and talking to each other, and then over a period of time, we ended up getting engaged right before I left, and then we kept in touch with each other over the years.

DePue: Okay. I've got a few closing questions here for you to kind of put things in perspective. Let me start with this one. For a long time, you had kind of done your best to avoid military service for a variety of reasons, but then obviously you were drafted, ended up in Germany. Do you think it was worth it? Was it a good experience for you?

Bowen: It was a good experience. It really made a difference in my life. I'm glad I did it, and I tried to make the best of it at the time I was doing it. I know the first two or three months, I didn't, (laughs) but I finally came around to making the best of it. I like to think they got a good two years out of [me].

DePue: They got their money's worth.

Bowen: Yeah, they got their money's worth.

DePue: Are you a different person because of that experience?

Bowen: Definitely a different person. I was able to see the world in a much broader sense. I was able to see how other people lived in other countries. I know that America is not probably a perfect place for a person to live, but of all the places I was able to see, I think I'd rather be here. I can at least speak out, talk about things, and I can usually get solutions to problems. There's a way of working things through, and I wouldn't trade it for any other country. I know that there are times when I wish things were different, but there's hope that I can change them.

DePue: Well, you mentioned that by the time you got to Purdue, you pretty much had your mind made up you were going to make something of your life. Is that a result of your experience in the military?

Bowen: I think the experience in the military allowed me to get far enough away to look back (laughs) at what I could do to make a difference and what I could do to take advantage of all the opportunities that were there and then develop

them for myself. One of the things that was available when I came back was the GI Bill, and I probably would not have been able to put together the finances to go to grad school like I did had it not been for that. One of the things that happened when I got back home: I had difficulty trying to get my GI benefits started, and I ended up eventually writing my senator, Senator Edward Dirksen, several letters. He parted the way for me to get my money. (laughs) He was able to talk to somebody and my checks started coming, and it really helped out.

DePue: You served in the Army at a very interesting time, at the height of the Vietnam War. We talked a little bit about your feelings about the war then. Kind of go back and touch base with your views of the Vietnam War then, especially whether or not you thought it was justified, and then looking at the perspective on it from today.

Bowen: Well, I think the thing about the Vietnam War is—and I think probably the good thing about it—is that when you're eighteen, nineteen, twenty, twenty-on, twenty-two, that early age where you get drafted in the military or end up going to the military, you don't look at the politics of it. At least with my situation—I didn't really get off into politics until much later. But you begin to hear and understand and start developing interest in it because so many things were going on, and you realized that every time you look around, there's somebody else coming up with a new view of how to look at this thing. And then you begin to see leaders like Dr. King saying, Hey, this is not something, war that he would support. Going all the way back to Eisenhower, we start sending advisors in. We think that the war played such a role on Lyndon Johnson that he probably didn't want to consider to running again for office.

So you begin to wonder why some people felt so strongly about getting in front of guns and tanks and getting shot on college campuses and setting off bombs, trying to fight against the establishment. It was difficult for me to understand the politics of it. And even to this day, I can't understand how people can hate [other] people so much that they want to kill them or destroy them and why we can't just talk these things through as opposed to fighting our way through things. It's difficult for me to understand how people can get to the point that they can't find a solution other than wanting to kill each other.

DePue: Well, you're saying that from the perspective in the midst of a war on terror. What are your views on our involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan, then?

Bowen: I wish there was another way to handle it rather than getting that many people killed and all the resources we've spent in there. If you look at what happened in Vietnam, we spent a lot of resources there, and I think over fifty thousand American troops were killed. And another thing—if you're going to fight these wars, turn the troops loose and let them do what they can as opposed to

having all these restrictions on what you can and can't do, what's basically going to be the rules of engagement. The rules of engagement are that if you're an American troop, we're going to put you in a war zone and we're going to tie one hand behind your back and tell you to fight. Well, that's not the way I'd like to see it done. If you're thinking strong enough about it, go over there to win, not to be a police action. So that's kind of my way about it. I just don't see a reason why we should be there when all these rules are saying that we can't do this, we can't do that. And then we look at all the, I think, good people who had good intentions and wouldn't have been in harm's way, like the Mi Lai situation. You ended up with individuals who went to jail and prison because they got carried away with war, fighting and killing people. Of course, they probably shouldn't have killed civilians, but if they hadn't had the war, they probably wouldn't have been in that position to do that. I think you'd find some of the same things taking place in Iraq as well as Afghanistan. If we're going there to fight, let's fight, not just go in there to babysit somebody.

DePue: Another thing that we've been following as we go through this interview is race relations. You grew up in southern Illinois, a tiny little place, an African-American in the midst of primarily a white culture and society. Kind of reflect back on your life in the United States. You ended up as a successful educator at Lincoln Land and recently retired. So what's your perspective on what's happened in race relations in the United States?

Bowen: It's so sad that people can allow other people to manipulate them into doing things to other people who are not in a position of power or in a position to be able to help themselves. What happens, I think, with the civil rights movement—there were people of faith who spoke out against things that were wrong. You hear too many people today who say that they're Christians, people of faith, and they see wrong and say nothing. It's a shame that people who know things are going on that should not be going, people are taken advantage of or not being treated fairly and equally, but still they won't speak out, they won't say anything about it and allow it to happen just because they or someone they know is going to end up receiving a benefit from it. That's the sad part about it, I think, is the fact that people will say that some African-American took their job or having an advantage over them, and I've even had that said to me when I came here and took the job at Lincoln Land. They said, Well, you took one of our jobs that we should have had. I don't know where these jobs have certain people's names on them, but I know that we've had situations where people have applied for jobs, applied for positions, and were never given a fair chance at them. I think that's a sad day. Americans are never going to be all they can be as long as they don't let people of color be all they can be. When you take advantage of a group that is powerless or a group that doesn't have the ability to be able to fend for themselves and then—you call it blaming the victim—and end up having people who come from poor neighborhoods—and that's what's so sad about what's going on today.

You have people who come from poor neighborhoods, poor homes, a lack [low?] of income or no income, and then when their kids show up for schools, because ended up I think 65 percent of Springfield's school district is eligible for the food programs [this is a confusing sentence. Please finish the thought]. Now, let's face it, they can't send their kids to schools that people of means can, of privilege can. So now that person comes from a house that starts off at a disadvantage. It's really a shame that somehow we can't fix this system to allow for a whole lot of other people to be included, only just because of the color of their skin, and if people of color could just take care of their color, they could blend into society and probably won't have the same kind of stigma that they have.

I saw a number that says if there's a hundred and twelve thousand jobs in the city of Springfield—now, with—depending on what number you look at—a 111 or 115 or 120, whatever you look at, that tells you right there, there's enough jobs to take care of some of these problems that's going on here. But you have busloads of people who come in as far as Litchfield, Jacksonville, places like that, that come in here every day to take these jobs, and so you create a ghetto by not giving people [in Springfield] jobs, and then you wonder why come the city of Springfield is having trouble with budgets, because all that money is going out of the city every month. So that's an issue, and when you think about it, all the tax base, the money that's been earned here in Springfield, just leaves every day at the end of the day, that could be paying taxes, that could be shoring up the deficit that's going on here. But these are not the people that are going to be able to vote for the people in town. So that's one of the things that I see that's wrong with the system. And because it works for certain people, they don't change it.

DePue: Do you think there has been some improvement from late fifties, early sixties, when you were growing up, to the present?

Bowen: There has been, but what you're finding out, that the haves are getting more and the poor are getting less. When I came to Springfield, there was a difficult time—even though we had fair housing laws that were passed in the sixties, it wasn't. I mean, there were places where people said, Hey, I'm just not going to sell my house to a black. And, you know, they just kind of ignored it. I knew that was a neighborhood I didn't want to be in, so I found another place. (laughs) But today, that person would probably be an agent and could be prosecuted for something like that. But a lot of laws are just not enforced, or we know about certain people because that's just the way they are. We still have disparities on the police department, the fire department; we have disparities as relates to city employees in terms of the numbers; we have disparities in health care, in terms of infant mortality rates in this town. Black kids have a greater chance of dying at an early age because of the medical treatment they're getting [or not getting?]. So something's wrong with the system. Is it better? Yes, it's better in a lot of ways, but it still has a lot of improvement to take place.

DePue: I'll finish up with this question, then, and just give you the opportunity to share some words of wisdom, if you will, for anybody who might want to listen to this, and reflect on your life as well.

Bowen: You know, I think you'd probably have to kind of reflect back in terms of my roots and I knew where I came from. I had to learn how to control anger. Working with my grandmother, she really worked you hard at being able to control anger. She had certain kinds of little sayings that kind of put you back on track if you begin to, like, lose it, so to speak. If she found you complaining about the weather or certain kinds of things that were taking place in the newspaper, she'd ask you this question: "Can you do anything about it?" And you'd say, "No." She'd say, "Well, don't worry about it."

So I'd like to think I've made some difference in a lot of people's lives, and I'd also like to give credit to one of my early students who helped me see things a little different for myself as well as for others. There were times I did not want to reach for something higher, and I was comfortable at a certain level, and she would always ask, "Rich, is this the best use of your time and your talent?" And she knew every time that would get me if I was thinking about not taking a promotion or something like that. And she would ask that one question, and that was always what it took to get me going and—"Okay, you win, I'll move on." (laughter) I think from that extent, I like to think I've been a good citizen and contributed much, added value to the people I worked for and I had represented their interests, and the students.

DePue: Well, thank you very much, Rich. This has been a fun interview for me to have with you. I've learned a lot. It was fascinating to hear your stories about going through basic, about the experiences in Germany, and your reflections on race relations and a lot of other things. So it'll be an excellent addition to our collection. So thank you again.

Bowen: Thank you for having me.

(end of interview #2, final)