

Interview with Kenneth "Tuck" Belton

VR2-A-L-2012-042.01

Interview # 1: Tuesday, October 30, 2012

Interviewer: Mark DePue

COPYRIGHT

The following material can be used for educational and other non-commercial purposes without the written permission of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. "Fair use" criteria of Section 107 of the Copyright Act of 1976 must be followed. These materials are not to be deposited in other repositories, nor used for resale or commercial purposes without the authorization from the Audio-Visual Curator at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, 112 N. 6th Street, Springfield, Illinois 62701. Telephone (217) 785-7955

Note to the Reader: Readers of the oral history memoir should bear in mind that this is a transcript of the spoken word, and that the interviewer, interviewee and editor sought to preserve the informal, conversational style that is inherent in such historical sources. The Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library is not responsible for the factual accuracy of the memoir, nor for the views expressed therein. We leave these for the reader to judge.

DePue: Today is Tuesday, October 30, 2012. My name is Mark DePue, the director of oral history with the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. I'm here today with Tuck Belton. Good morning, Tuck.

Belton: Good morning.

DePue: How are you this morning?

Belton: Well, I'm pretty good, able to get up and take nourishment, so that's a step in the right direction.

DePue: Very good. Let's start with this. When and where were you born?

Belton: Well I was born in Tallula, Illinois on November 2, 1922.

DePue: And you just mentioned you're just a couple days away from your ninetieth birthday?

Belton: Ninetieth birthday will be this Friday.

DePue: Well, happy birthday in advance.

Belton: Thank you.

DePue: Now, the other thing I wanted to get established up front, Tuck, that's an unusual name. So let's start with your full name, and then you can tell us how you ended up with that as a nickname.

Belton: Well, my full name is Cecil—which I never cared for—Kenneth and Belton. There's a long story how I...I don't know how I got Cecil. My dad got fouled up at the doctor's office. But anyhow, he had the name of Tuck as a nickname, and I was known...He was Big Tuck, and I was Little Tuck. Later on, of course, after he passed away, I sort of adopted that name, and I've had it for many, many years.

DePue: It's one of those really cool nicknames. I don't blame you for keeping it.

Belton: Well I don't know how cool it is, but I've had it for a long, long while.

DePue: Tell us a little bit about Tallula. Where's Tallula?

Belton: Tallula, Illinois is about twenty-two miles northwest of Springfield. And back in the days when I was growing up there, it was a coal mining and agricultural community. And it was a very thriving village. We had a daily newspaper, a couple of hardware stores, two banks, a butcher shop, jewelry store, dentist, doctors, filling stations and a very thriving community.

We had five coal mines within about four miles of the village, and my father was a coal miner, by the way. Of course, they're all gone now, and Tallula today is only a... Well in 1929 the banks, of course, went down, like they did all over the country. And the businesses closed and so forth. And today it's only a sleeping community for Springfield. There is nothing left there, to speak of, except a post office and senior center and maybe one tavern; I'm not sure.

DePue: I know that this part of Illinois, there were a lot of immigrants that settled here to work in the coal mines. Belton, though, sounds like...Is that English or German?

Belton: Scottish. I traced my father's ancestry all the way back to...I forget what year. My wife and I did, through the genealogical libraries out in Mesa in Arizona. He came from Scotland. My mother was English.

DePue: What was your mother's name?

Belton: Epperly.

DePue: What was her first name?

Belton: Freda, F-r-e-d-a.

DePue: Epperly? And what nationality did you say she was?

Belton: English. Her ancestors were from England. DePue: Did she work?

Belton: Yes, she worked. Well, during the Depression, when I was a teenager, of course, she worked and done just a little bit of everything to sort of help keep things going. And, as you know, in the coal mining industry in the summertime, the miners didn't have work, because nobody needed any heat; they didn't buy any coal. So, she done housework, hung wallpaper. I can remember, she baked some of the best cinnamon rolls and iced them, and I delivered them around town, you know, anything to make a couple of bucks to get by on.

And then, when the war started, she worked at Illiopolis, at the ammunition plant. My dad was injured severely in a coal mining accident at Lincoln Mine, that isn't there anymore, but he had his kidneys crushed and so forth.

DePue: When was that?

Belton: Oh golly, that was around 1930, maybe '32, somewhere in there, which made it doubly hard, of course, for us.

DePue: You were born in 1922. I'm wondering if your father served in the First World War.

Belton: No, no. He didn't serve in any service.

DePue: Was he not old enough at the time?

Belton: Well, I don't know. No, I guess he would have been... Let's see, in 19... He was born in 1900.

DePue: He would have been just barely old enough. Nineteen seventeen is when they started to draft.

(telephone rings)

Belton: During World War I, yeah.

DePue: So, well, should we pause? (pause in recording) Okay, we're back after a quick break. We were talking about your father. He had his kidneys crushed?

Belton: A lot of rock fell in a mine and fell on him and crushed his kidneys. It was quite serious. He ended up in the hospital for quite a while, and he hired a lawyer. Back in those days, you know, coal mining employees were looked upon, not like they are today. That was before the days of John L. Lewis,¹ and

¹ John L. Lewis was president of the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) from 1920 until 1960 and founding president of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). His was the dominant voice in shaping

they had the unions and all that. They had nothing really to say. The lawyer he had, he always claimed the company paid him more than he [my father] could. So he didn't get anything out of the whole accident, even his hospital bill.

DePue: Well, he gets injured right at the depths of the Depression. What happened to the family afterwards? Were they relying on your mom's income?

Belton: Well, yes, but we lost our home, and we had to move out of our home. I can remember one time my father came in and laid his hand down, and he said, "That's every penny I have." I don't recall just how old I was, old enough to remember this. He raised his hand up and there was a \$50 bill underneath it. And, as he said, it was all the money he had.

We were very poor, very poor. Mom done a lot of different work for a lot of different people. Then my dad, he worked at a filling station, some work that he could, you know, handle, other than any kind of labor.

DePue: Did you have any brothers and sisters?

Belton: I had two sisters and a brother. The two sisters are deceased. My brother is still living—he's seven years younger—in Davenport, Iowa.

DePue: Were you the oldest or the...

Belton: I was the oldest of the four.

DePue: Did you help around, during the depths of the Depression, with bringing in a little bit of money, as well?

Belton: Well, I had paper routes. At one time I had the paper route for the whole town of Tallula, which isn't very big... Well, about 650 population. But it took me a while to deliver all the papers. And then, I... I don't know if I should put this in the interview or not. My father and I, we really didn't get along too well. When I was about seven years old, I went to live with my grandparents. I lived with them until I graduated out of high school. They were great people, wonderful people.

DePue: Was this in Tallula, as well?

Belton: In Tallula, yes.

DePue: Was the family supporters of FDR?

Belton: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. My whole family was supporters of FDR.

DePue: You mentioned, when we were talking before we got started today, about a program that you got involved with in high school.

Belton: National Youth Association.

DePue: And what was that?

Belton: Well, it was a program, I think, that was instigated during FDR's New Deal, part of his New Deal, as I understood it. The government, I think, furnished the money. I know I made...I think it was \$6 a week, for the work I was putting in. I worked about two, maybe two and a half hours, each day for five days. That would be about, I think, \$6, as I recall.

DePue: What was the work?

Belton: It was the same work I'd been doing and getting nothing. I helped my grandfather. He was the janitor of the high school. After school, of course, I was always in sports. I loved basketball, and I'd go real fast to get my work done, so I could get on a basketball court and practice, you know. (DePue chuckles) But it [the work] consisted of, I had to sweep the floors every night, all the floors and all the steps. And every morning, early, we'd go down, and we'd dust all the desks.

In the wintertime, we'd have to go down around 4:30, in order to get the fire going in the boiler to get 160 pounds of pressure—I can remember that to this day—to make sure the second floor was heated. (both laugh)

My grandfather was a perfectionist, and he taught me a lot of things about doing it the first time and doing it right and how to take care of tools. That has stayed with me all my life.

DePue: Those are good lessons to learn at an early age.

Belton: They were very, very good.

DePue: What was your grandfather's name?

Belton: Kenton P. Epperly.

DePue: Kenton?

Belton: Kenton.

DePue: So, obviously, your mother's father?

Belton: Kenton Price Epperly. Yeah, my mother's father.

- DePue: Now, when we met... This was some time ago when we met before, but I know I need to ask you about wallpaper. Somehow wallpaper figures into your early life story.
- Belton: Well, my mother used to hang a lot of wallpaper. And sometimes I'd try to help her, but I think sometimes I was more of a hindrance than I was a good helper. That wasn't one of my better jobs. (laughs)
- DePue: Did she do that in your own home, or did she actually do that as a job?
- Belton: She'd go into other people's homes. They would always buy their own wallpaper, and she would do the work there. That's when they used all the liquid paste and that sort of thing.
- DePue: That's quite a job!
- Belton: Yeah, I can remember a couple of times, getting up on the ladder and having the wallpaper, and the first thing I know, it was draped around me. (both laugh) It's a little art to hanging wallpaper.
- DePue: I would imagine part of the job is a matter of timing. You've got only so much time, maybe, before the paste starts to dry.
- Belton: Well, yeah, a little bit, but that's not a big deal. You would have plenty of time to brush it down and get all the air bubbles out and get the seams together and that sort of thing.
- DePue: Getting the seams together, I'll bet that was the trick.
- Belton: That's very tricky. My wife and I done some of that many years ago, when I built my own home. She and I tackled some wallpaper. It was quite a chore.
- DePue: Where did you attend high school?
- Belton: In Tallula, Illinois, Tallula Community High School.
- DePue: What was the size of your graduating class? Do you remember?
- Belton: Yes, about twenty-three or four. That really was one of the first highlights of my life. I didn't know it, but I was picked to win the Scholarship Loyalty Scholastic Award. A senior got it each year at graduation, and I was picked for that. I was on cloud nine, because it was quite an honor. I was getting along with it real fine, until they told me I had to make an acceptance speech at commencement. That kind of (both laugh) took the wind out of my sails. But I got the job done.
- DePue: Did you get a little money with that?

Belton: No, no, no, no money whatsoever.

DePue: You said you were into sports, as well, basketball you mentioned.

Belton: Basketball. I played basketball all four years in high school, and I was captain the senior year. In fact, 1939 was our best year. We lacked two games from going to the state tournament.

DePue: What position did you play?

Belton: Forward.

DePue: How tall were you then?

Belton: I was only about...I was a little taller then than I am now. I was about five-ten and a half. But, back in those days, if you had a six-foot guy for center, you were doing real good, because we had no seven-footers in those days, like we have today.

DePue: Was Tallula big enough to have a football team?

Belton: No, we didn't have football. It was too much of an expense for the school. But we had basketball; we had baseball and track and softball.

DePue: Was yours a religious family?

Belton: No. I would say no. My grandparents, I think the only time I can ever remember being in a church with my grandfather, who was a wonderful man, was at his funeral. But he lived just catty corner, across from the Tallula Christian Church, and that's where I attended as a teenager.

In fact, the preacher—E.K. Beckett was his name—he was my second father. He just took me underneath his wing and held me responsible to do jobs around the church and got me off on the right foot. I'd milk his cow for him when he was on vacation. And one of my jobs—responsibility—was to heat the little stove that heated the water in the baptismal tank. I always worried about that, to get the temperature just right for the water, so it wouldn't be too cold, or it wouldn't be too hot. (both laugh)

DePue: Who was getting you to church, or were you just going on your own?

Belton: I just went on my own. I went to the Christian Church, mostly due to E.K. Beckett. He encouraged me. In fact, I haven't mentioned this to many people in my lifetime, but Mr. Beckett offered to send me to four years of seminary college, if I would become a minister. And I thought long and heavy about that. I've often wondered in the years past, what [I] would be today if I had done that.

DePue: Well, I think it's very unusual that you are going on your own. Most everybody, as they're growing up, has a parent or a grandparent or somebody who's taking them to church.

Belton: My parents, they never went to church much or my grandparents either. I went to Sunday school and church. I got quite involved in the Christian Church as a teenager, with what they call Christian Endeavor. [That] would meet on Sunday evenings, and we'd have picnics and that sort of thing. But the minister had a lot to do with keeping the youth of the church coming.

DePue: Was going to church a good way to meet girls?

Belton: Yes, yes. I remember walking home one of the [girls], Mary Bryant, who was a cheerleader. I would walk her home. Her father was very, very strict, and I was always afraid of him. I'd get within half a block of her house; I'd say goodbye, and she went on home. (both laugh)

But I was so busy in sports in high school, I didn't date much at all. Well, I didn't have any money for one thing. Nobody had any money or cars or anything like that, in those days. And most of the girls, Allegra and Martha Ellen, they were very dear friends of mine. We lived close together and walked to school every day, back and forth. I just had a real close relationship with most of the kids in the class really.

DePue: What did you think you wanted to do with your life after you graduated?

Belton: Well, in the back of my mind, I always thought I'd like to fly. There was a man in town—his name was Volker Vatterton(?). He was a colonel in the Army Air Corps, and he had wings. He was a brother of the druggist in our community, the drug store. I talked to him several times, and he told me about life that he was going through and so forth and some of his adventures and so forth and so on. I got quite interested in that part of the service.

But actually, when I graduated out of high school, I guess those thoughts sort of were on the back burner. And I (chuckles) didn't have any money. My folks had no money, of course. I went down to Petersburg, and I talked to Judge Whip. He loaned me \$50 for the first year's tuition at Illinois State Teachers College in Normal, Illinois.

DePue: Judge Whip?

Belton: Judge Whip, Virgil Whip. And he loaned me the \$50 on a handshake. I had nothing to go back it up with.

DePue: Was that an entire year's—

Belton: That took care of me the first year at Illinois State Teachers College. Well, another classmate of mine went with me, and we had our own little apartment, off-campus, at Illinois State Teachers College.

DePue: So, that covered the tuition but not room and board?

Belton: Right, right.

DePue: Well, how in the world did you handle room and board?

Belton: Well, our folks would send food up with us and that sort of thing. We didn't get heavy (laughs) from the food that we had, but one of the guys rooming at the house where we were at was Bernie—his name—and he was the manager of the Steak and Shake on old Route 66 in Normal. Every once in a while he would bring home some hamburger. That was quite a treat for us to have hamburgers. Sometimes we'd make gravy. You know, it's amazing what you can do when you have to. (both laugh) I found that out overseas. (laughs)

DePue: Yeah, I bet you did! You're going to a teachers college. Did you intend to teach afterwards?

Belton: Yes, I wanted to teach; I wanted to be a coach. That was my impression, or the first thing that impressed me was, I'd like to be a basketball coach or any kind of a coach in high school.

DePue: What were you majoring in in college?

Belton: Well, I only went there one year. I only went there one year, so I didn't get around to majoring in anything. I quit there and went to work for Western Electric Company.

DePue: Before we get too far into what happened after you graduated from high school, I wanted to ask you if you were one of those kids... You delivered newspapers quite a bit. Are you paying attention to the news that you're delivering, paying attention to what's going on in Europe at the time?

Belton: Not really, not really. I had a wonderful time growing up in Tallula, although our family had nothing at all, but I wouldn't trade my childhood for anything. We didn't have anything, really, but we created our own entertainment and made wonderful friends. I just had a wonderful life, growing up. In fact, I cried when I had to graduate out of high school, because I was in all the sports and the class play and operettas and spelling contests and you name it. I really enjoyed high school very much.

DePue: Do you think it was good to be in a class where there are only twenty-some kids, instead of a much bigger class?

Belton: Oh, I think so, very definitely. I always had a very good relationship with all the teachers. There wasn't a teacher I had that I couldn't go to and say, "Hey, I need a little help," or I need this, or I need that. They were all very helpful and very nice people. And if you wanted to stay after, they'd help you out with, you know, something. I had no problems whatsoever. I thought quite highly of all my teachers, the principal, and Julia Steier(?). I can name them all by name, yet today. They were great.

DePue: Did your grandparents have a radio? Did you get to listen to the radio once in a while?

Belton: My grandfather had an Atwater Kent Radio. I don't know if you recall what those were. I don't think you're old enough. It had a metal case about so big and had the speaker on top; it was a two-piece outfit. I can remember him sitting in his chair with his pipe in his mouth, listening to Clearwater stations, like WGN, and there was one in Dallas, Texas. There was only a few that you could get at night, because there was so much static on the air.

DePue: When I asked you before if you were paying attention to the news at all, I think you had mentioned earlier, you actually heard a speech by Hitler one time, on the radio.

Belton: Oh, yes, in 1939 they would assemble all of us in what we called the assembly hall in the high school. It was a big room in the center on the second floor. And we would listen to Hitler's speeches. I can remember hearing "*Heil Hitler! Heil Hitler!*" Little did I realize, sitting there as a junior in high school, that I was going to be quite involved in World War II.

DePue: When did you graduate from high school?

Belton: Nineteen forty.

DePue: So, this would have been about the time Germany invaded Poland. That was in September, 1939. Do you remember that?

Belton: Yes, yes, I remember that. Poland was the first country, wasn't it, that he invaded?

DePue: Right.

Belton: And then Holland and Belgium was next. But Holland was pretty high on the list. I had a dear friend that lived in Nijmegen, Holland, who I didn't know at that time, Steve Myers. He lived in Nijmegen, and he was in the Dutch Underground, which I later was a part of, during World War II.

DePue: Yeah, the Germans invaded... They went west in the spring of 1940. So, Holland and Belgium and France, the Low Countries,² were occupied. Do you remember all of that? Were you surprised by how quickly Germany was able to roll up all those countries?

Belton: Well, after thought, back when I was graduating out of high school, I really didn't give it a lot of thought. I listened to the news, of course, and knew what was going on. I guess I really didn't know how serious it was, until December 7, 1941, when I was home. I was working for Western Electric, and I was home that Sunday afternoon. And the news came of the sneak attack on Pearl Harbor. And then, my brain started turning (laughs), because I knew we were in trouble, with another war.

DePue: Did you start thinking then about your ambition to fly?

Belton: Well, I did. At that time, when Pearl Harbor happened, I still was really serious about it. And let's see, when Pearl Harbor, that was in '41. Let's see, I was only... I was seventeen when I graduated out of high school. I was about eighteen and a half, I guess, or something like that. And I was working for Western Electric.

I don't know how far you want to go with this, but we were working in Peoria in '42, I guess it was. There were five of us, five friends of mine, four friends and I. And we, all five of us, decided to go enlist in the Air Corps. They had recruiting sessions there in Peoria.

So, unfortunately, there was a couple of pubs on the way, and we had to have a little glass of beer here and a glass of beer there. We got to the recruiting stations, and to make a long story short, out of the five guys that were going in the Air Force, I'm the only one that made it. Two of them went to the Marines. Two guys went to the army. And I forget where the fifth guy... I was the only one that ended up in the Army Air Force.

DePue: What happened to the other ones? Did they not pass the physical or—

Belton: Well, they got in the wrong department, over in the recruiting stations. Like I said, we had stopped at a couple of taverns along the way, and our thoughts probably weren't (laughs) too clear.

DePue: Maybe you were a bit more clear-headed than the other four?

² The coastal region or northwestern Europe, consisting of Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg, is known as the Low Countries because much of the land along the North Sea is below or at sea level. (<http://www.answers.com/topic/low-countries#ixzz3As5NyPhz>)

Belton: Well, I don't know about that, but maybe I was just more fortunate. I don't know. But, I passed the six-four. It was sort of a strict physical, for the Air Force, and I had no trouble passing that.

DePue: Did the rest of your buddies, at the time, all want to be pilots, as well?

Belton: Oh, I don't recall that. But they wanted to go in the Air Force. I don't know if they wanted to be pilots or not.

DePue: I would think the hurdle for you, though, is to convince the Air Force that you wanted to be a pilot, rather than a ground crew or something else.

Belton: Well, when I enlisted, I enlisted in the Army Air Corps. But, I had to take basic training. I had to go into the Army as an enlisted man, first and take my basic training and everything. Then they discharge you, and you go into pilot training or cadet training, I should say.

DePue: But from the beginning, the Army's understanding was your understanding, that you're going to go to pilot's training?

Belton: In the Air Corp, yes.

DePue: Where did you do your basic training?

Belton: My basic training was in Sheppard Field, Texas, Wichita Falls, Texas.

DePue: Any memories from that?

Belton: Well, do you want to know what we called it? (laughs)

DePue: Sure.

Belton: We called it the "hell hole of creation." (both laugh) Well, we had an outbreak of spinal meningitis when I was there. We were confined to our barracks for two weeks and fed out of the back end of a GI [government issue] truck. [We] had to hang sheets between our beds, bunks, and we had to bivouac³ and go on marches. They taught us our left from our right and how to march and all that sort of thing.

I didn't care for basic training at all. It was... Well, part of the training I knew I had to have, and I tolerated all of it. I didn't have any trouble getting through, but I only had KP [kitchen patrol] once in my entire career in the service, and that was in Wichita Falls. And that was enough.

DePue: Well, Tuck, you know that the army didn't want you to care for basic training.

Belton: (laughs) Well, I guess that's true, yeah.

³ A temporary camp built outside, without any tents. (http://www.1doceonline.com/Military-topic/bivouac_1)

DePue: Do you remember what it was that you particularly didn't like about basic?

Belton: Well I remember the bivouacs. We'd go out for like a couple of nights bivouac and take our packs and everything. Down there in Wichita Falls, we'd get up of a morning; you had on every stitch you owned, because it was so cold. And then by noon, you had everything off, down to your waist, because it was so hot.

Out in the field, where we took our exercises, the calisthenics, we always said Oklahoma dust blew over in the morning, and Texas dust blew back in the afternoon. The environment wasn't the greatest there. Well, of course, I didn't care for basic training, and I didn't like the weather any better, either. (laughs)

DePue: When did you actually go to that recruiting station?

Belton: Basic training?

DePue: Well, I'm backing up a little bit. You went to the recruiting station—

Belton: Oh, oh, that was December of '42.

DePue: So, you're in basic in the early fall of 1942?

Belton: Yes, yes.

DePue: Where to after that?

Belton: Well, I left basic training, and I was selected to go to the training—what did they call that—College Training Detachment. And I was sent to Denver University.

DePue: College Training Detachment?

Belton: Um hmm, for the Air Force. It was a short term there, very strict, something like West Point. We were under strict commands all the time, and the classrooms were very intense. We had courses like...I hadn't had much math in high school, just, you know, general math. And we had...Oh, what am I trying to say here?

DePue: Calculus?

Belton: Calculus and some trigonometry. Fortunately, we had a guy in our fraternity who was very smart in mathematics. He got a lot of us through. We'd talk about cramming until midnight. We done that almost every night. And we had courses like *Theory of Flight* and *Public Speaking*. I don't recall all of them. But, we used to say, if we dropped our pencil, we were two days behind

before we could pick it up. (both laugh) But I made it through. They tested us to see if we would adapt to flying, at Denver. There was—

DePue: This was a physical test you're taking?

Belton: No, no, flying. It wasn't really a test, but we would go up in a small airplane, like a Piper Cub, just to see if we'd get sick or anything like that. We didn't do any flying or anything. We had a pilot that took us. In fact, the one that took me up was some lady, some young woman. We went up a couple, three times. Some fellows would get sick to their stomach. That was a hurdle they couldn't get by. They wouldn't take you if you got sick every time you went up in the sky.

DePue: I think, if I were getting sick every time I went up, I wouldn't want to be going up.

Belton: Well, you'd be surprised. I had a friend in cadet training that, every time he would see one of those needles—and we saw those a lot—he would just get white in the face, and I'd usually try to get him over to a drinking fountain and get cold water on his face. I think he got through cadet training.

DePue: I think there is one other thing that we need to back up with, as well. Had you been dating at the time you got into the military?

Belton: Oh, yes. I met my girlfriend... Well, I met my future wife, as a junior in high school. She was beautiful, young blonde; weren't they all? (both laugh) But she was something special, in my story and—

DePue: Was she in the same class?

Belton: Yes, we were in the same class in Tallula, in junior high and high school. But, then her folks, they moved from Tallula to Atterberry. Her name was Atterberry, by the way, from Atterberry.

DePue: It's Atterberry, Indiana or—

Belton: No, no, Illinois. It's about six miles west of Petersburg on [Route] 97.

DePue: Is that an Atterberry with a—

Belton: A-t-t-e-r-b-e-r-r-y, Atterberry.

DePue: That's her name or the town's name?

Belton: That was her name, and that's the town's name. Her great-grandfather donated the land that Atterberry was on.

DePue: So it's named after her family?

Belton: Right, right. She and—

DePue: Her first name?

Belton: Virginia, Virginia Gale, a wonderful woman.

DePue: How serious were you, at the time you decided to join up?

Belton: Can you stop it for a minute? I have trouble talking about her.

(brief pause)

Well, let's see... If you're ready to start. I was dating my wife in high school. I guess you'd call it dating. No one had any money. We'd sort of go to the show, and everybody paid their own way. Then we'd take the girls home. We'd get eight or ten in one car, and we'd all throw in ten or fifteen cents to buy the gas to go to Petersburg. That was the closest theater, nine miles away.

Then, of course, after I left high school and went to college, she was one of the main reasons I quit college. The folks, when I walked in and told them I was through, up at Illinois State Teachers College, they like to had a stroke. Anyhow, (both chuckle) I went to work for Western Electric, and I continued seeing her, of course.

But, when I went to the College Training Detachment at Denver, before I went into the service, she and I had a serious talk about marriage. We both cared quite a lot about each other, and we wanted to get married. We both decided that, due to circumstances that can happen during the war, that it might be best to wait until afterwards and get married.

Well, when I was out in Denver University, I got pretty lonesome, I'll tell you that. And one night I called her up. She was in Chicago, living with her mother and sister, who was working at the C-56 airplane factory, Rosie the Riveter's. I called her up and I said, "Virginia," I says, "I don't know about you, but," I said, "it's really horrible out here, without being able to see you," and how much I miss her, you know, all that.

And she says, "Well, what do you think it's been like here in Chicago?" (DePue laughs) And I said, "Would you like to come out here, and we'll get married?" She says, "I'm on the way." So, that was the beginning of sixty-five years of a wonderful life. She came out, and we got married.

I graduated out of that school and went to California, where I got all of my training and then went to pre-flight school in California. She went back to Chicago. I went through pre-flight and got through pre-flight and got to Oxnard, California for primary and called her up. She came out, and we were together all through all my training, until I went overseas.

DePue: How long were you at Denver?

Belton: Gosh, let's see... We got married in July.

DePue: Was it a few months?

Belton: Oh, yeah. I'm going to say, maybe five months or so, something like that.

DePue: So you're a long way short of ever being a graduate from college. Apparently the Air Force didn't require that at the time?

Belton: No, no, no. It was kind of funny. In peacetime, you had to have a four-year college degree to go to become a pilot. And during the war, of course, I don't know if we were smarter or what, but they put us through in two years (laughs) to get our commission and so forth.

DePue: Well, I've been in the Army long enough to know that it's a matter of supply and demand, more than anything else.

Belton: Right, absolutely. You're absolutely right.

DePue: So, you said you went out to California for pre-flight training. What I want you to do is to take me through each step, and what is it that you're learning to do in each one of these steps. So, pre-flight is in Santa Ana?

Belton: Pre-flight was in Santa Ana, California.

DePue: And what are you learning there?

Belton: Well, at pre-flight, of course, we always had a lot of physical training to keep our bodies in shape. But we had airplane identification, warship, naval vessel identification. We had to learn Morse code, send it and receive it. Let's see, what else did we have there? That was four of the main, basic courses that we had, and they were tough. Morse code wasn't too bad, but you have a tendency to send Morse code faster than you can receive it. And that was hard to slow it down so that the other person could receive it, as well as you.

But the airplane identification, they would flash all the aircraft, like Italian, German, Japanese, American, UK, on the screen at 1000th of a second, like a silhouette, and you had to identify the plane. I had a little trouble with that, starting out. I talked to one of my instructors, and he advised



Tuck and Virginia Belton's wedding portrait. The two were married in July, 1943 in Denver while Tuck was attending Denver University at the beginning of his training as a pilot.

me to look to the side, rather than straight at the image and see if that didn't help, and it did, a lot. And I got by.

But I had a little more trouble on naval vessel identification. We had to identify the same thing, only we got three-tenths of a second on Navy destroyers and Japanese and German and submarines and warships and cruisers and destroyers and the whole fleet. That was three of our main courses we had in pre-flight. We had some other courses there. I can't remember... Most of them were ground studies. I can't remember the name of most of them though.

DePue: All of this, though, sounds like you're still a long way away from actually getting in or flying an aircraft.

Belton: Yeah, well, when we left Santa Ana pre-flight, we went to primary training.

DePue: And that was in Oxnard, you said?

Belton: That was in Oxnard. We went to a place called Meraloma Flying School. Our base was actually a big motel in a big, circular space. We had rooms there, and we had all civilian instructors. At the primary, everybody was Mister, Mister this and Mister that. And I almost washed out in primary. My instructor, his name was Mr. Perlig(?); I'll never forget him. He and I didn't really get along, from day one. From the time we'd get in the Stearman — We flew Stearman⁴, by the way—and—

DePue: Is that a PT-13?

Belton: PT, yeah. He would just be on my back, from the time we started until we ended. He'd get me so upset that I probably wasn't doing a good job. So, he put me up for a checkride with the Army. We had Army personnel that would come around and give you a checkride⁵. Normally, if you got a checkride with the Army, it was just a matter of taking me up and around the traffic pattern, back down, and that was it; you were out.

Well, a fellow by the name of Lieutenant Cox, he put me up for a checkride, and I thought I was done. My wife and I, we were really down in the dumps. Anyhow, we went for a checkride, and he took me out of the

⁴ A biplane, built as a training airplane for the U.S. Air Force and Navy in the early 1930s. http://www.stearman.at/boeing_stearman.html

⁵ The final step in achieving a pilot certificate or rating. Before exercising the privileges of a certificate or rating, a pilot must have taken and passed a checkride. This practical exam is taken with an FAA Inspector or an FAA designated pilot examiner. <http://www.nangaylord.com/Checkrides.html>

traffic pattern and told me to do this, do that, Chandelles⁶ and spins, pull two or three force landings and everything you could think of. We stayed up for, oh, I'm going to say forty-five minutes. I thought, boy, this is unusual.

We went back, and he says, "Take me back to the field." They don't tell you anything. They just say, "Do this. Do that. Take me back." I took him back and got into a traffic pattern, called the tower and everything. In those things, you had to be careful you didn't ground loop them. They had such a narrow landing gear, it was pretty common to see some of them ground loop. They'd come in and round, round, grind off some of the (laughs) end of the wing.

DePue: We're looking at a picture of one of these Stearman. It's a bi-plane.

Belton: Yeah, yeah, open cockpit.

DePue: Open cockpit, fixed landing.

Belton: Yeah. It's one of the greatest acrobatic planes they ever had. It still is. You see them at air shows today.

DePue: What was Mr. Perlig's problem with you?

Belton: Well, we just... Personality, I guess, mostly and he just... I don't think he cared for me, and I sure didn't care for him. He put me up for that checkride. I didn't finish the story, but we came back down, and Lieutenant Cox, the man that took me up for the checkride, he went in the... I'll say the waiting room, what we'd call it. Anyhow, he went in there, and I'm standing out there. I was in a cold sweat, because I didn't know just what the story was.

About that time, my commander came out. I says, "Sir, I can't stand this tension any longer." I said, "I just came back from a check flight, and he didn't tell me how I done or anything." "Oh, by the way," he says, "Lieutenant Cox told me it was one of the best rides he ever had." I almost melted, down into the tarmac. (both laugh)

Before I could say, "Well, I'd like to have another instructor," he said, "By the way, Mr. Belton, you report to Mr. Atkinson, Monday morning. He'll be your new instructor." He [Mr. Atkinson] and I got along fine. And I went

⁶ An aircraft control maneuver where the pilot combines a 180° turn with a climb. It is now required by the Federal Aviation Administration for attaining a commercial flight certificate.
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chandelle>

through primary training without any... And he taught me some things that I didn't even know an airplane could do. He was a nice guy.

DePue: Was it Lieutenant Cox who took you up on that checkride?

Belton: Yeah, but he was an Army pilot.

DePue: They knew that Perlig could be a little bit rough around the edges?

Belton: Well, that I don't know. That I don't know. But one of our instructors there was Bob Cummings. I don't know if you ever heard of Bob Cummings. He was a movie actor. And he was—

DePue: Robert Cummings, yes.

Belton: Robert Cummings, he was about as crazy acting there as he was in the movies. In fact, my wife worked in the PX, and so did a friend of hers, and that guy was always telling jokes. Dina(??) Bell, she came in one morning and had tea bags on for earrings. He nicknamed her Teabag Tilly. (Both laugh) She kept that name all through cadet training.

DePue: At this time, did you know what kind of aircraft you were going to end up flying?

Belton: Well, all through the different phases of our training, primary, basic and so forth, we would put in what we would like to be. My choice was fighter pilot. Well, we got to basic at Chico, California—

DePue: Is that the next step?

Belton: That's the next step, yes. And our CO [commanding officer] come out one day and told us, "All of you cadets who are wanting to be fighter pilots, you'd better think about changing your mind, because we don't need any fighter pilots right now." And he says, "If you continue to ask for that, as your first choice, a lot of you are going to end up as a flight officer," which was a rank like a, what do they call those officers? They weren't commissioned, you know.

DePue: Warrant officers?

Belton: Warrant officers. He says, "You'll probably end up as a flight officer, pulling targets down in Arizona somewhere for young cadets to shoot at. That scared me!

DePue: (laughs)

Belton: So I changed right there, my choice, and went to multi-engine. My training the rest of the way was for multi-engine pilot.

DePue: Did you continue doing flight training, once you got to...I guess you went from primary to basic?

Belton: I went to basic at Chico, California, and we flew what they call a...Is this a picture of it or not here?

DePue: That's a BT-15 there. Is that what you were flying?

Belton: Yeah, I think we flew BT-13s. We called them "Vultee vibrators." (laughs)

DePue: Vultee vibrators?

Belton: Vultee, I think that's who made the plane.

DePue: With a "V" or a "B"?

Bolton: "V," V-u-l-t-e-e vibrators. And there we started more intense training. We had to fly at night, and we had to land at night, take off at night. I think we got a little bit of instrument flying there, not too awfully much. But, well, like you say, it was basic training. We did solo there, in the Vultee. (laughs)

My friend and I that flew together, we got in there to take off one day, and we got all ready to go, and we forgot to put the prop in the little pitch. We took off, and run down to the end of the runway and run off in the sand. We didn't damage the plane or anything. Our instructor happened to be in the control tower. He said, "What the h-e-double too [h-e-double toothpicks, slang for hell] are you folks doing down there?"

"We don't know; something's wrong with the plane. We just couldn't get it off the ground." We started talking, you know, and he says, "Did you have that plane in low pitch?" I said, "Yes, Sir!" (both laugh) And he said, "Well, no more flying for you guys today. Come on in. You're done. We'll make it up later." So, it was pilot error, all the way.

DePue: I suspect he'd seen a lot of different things.

Belton: Oh, yeah, he probably knew pretty much what happened. (laughs)

DePue: What was your rank, during all these steps of training?

Belton: Cadet, just cadet, yeah.

DePue: You weren't commissioned yet?

Belton: Oh, no, no, no. No commission, all the way until we got our wings.

DePue: What would have happened if you had washed out?

Belton: I guess they'd have...I don't know what they'd have done with me. I don't know.

DePue: Possibly turned you into an infantryman or—

Belton: Well, no. I don't know about that.

DePue: ...on a flight crew or something like that?

Belton: I'd have probably, maybe, stayed in the Army Air Corps. There was a lot of other jobs in the Air Corps, other than pilots. But I never really gave that much thought.

DePue: Was being a navigator or bombardier one of the options that you had, as well?

Belton: Yes, yes. You would have had to gone on to a bombardier school or a navigation school. We got some training, especially on navigation. We got a little bit of celestial navigation training and wind speeds and basic navigational feats, but mostly it was flying the airplane, getting familiar with the airplane and that sort of thing.

DePue: Now maybe this isn't something they gave you an option on either, but did you prefer, at that time, to go to Europe or to the Pacific?

Belton: No, we didn't know. We had no choice. We had no choice. I never really give that any thought, because I had just assumed we would go to Europe, which we did.

DePue: Most of this training, I would guess, is 1943 now?

Belton: Yes, up until...Let's see, I graduated in May of 1944.

DePue: How closely were you guys paying attention to what was going on in the war?

Belton: Well, we were paying more attention then, because we were getting closer to going somewhere into combat, and we paid more attention to it. But, as I recall, it was a full-time job, flying and trying to learn everything in the different airplanes you flew.

From basic, we lost a couple of cadets in basic accidents. It was kind of sobering, when that happened. And then, of course, once we left Chico basic, we went to Stockton, California for advanced flying. There we got into two-engine planes and started our training for...Well, we had to fly instruments a lot, where they put up the screen over your glass, so you can't see and to do any dead reckoning. You have to fly strictly on instruments. We'd go up and make round robin trips and so forth, come back and just all kind of training, of course, how to handle the plane and all about the plane. Oh

gosh, it's been so many years ago, I can't remember everything they did teach us there.

But, anyhow, we had to do an instrument check with the pilots out of Kelly Field, Texas. They were Army, Army Air Corps pilots. They'd check us out on instruments. We had to pass the instrument test, before we could graduate. I had a little trouble, I remember, on... Out in California—this was before we had all this fancy electronic equipment—we used the radio quite a lot and we flew by quadrants, you know, A, B, B quadrant and so forth.

I was taking a test one day with my pilot, and I was doing what he said. We were supposed to go into Stockton for a landing and then take off the shield and see where you're at. I went in fine, but I was in the wrong airport.

DePue: (laughs)

Belton: He told me what I done wrong. Those mountains caused those radio beams to bend, and I'd flew out of one quadrant and into another. There was a way to figure that out, if you knew how, had the knowledge, which he told me, of course. I had to straighten that out, before I ever passed my test with the Army check pilots. But I overcame that. (chuckles) But when I took that screen down, and I was... I think it was... Where was I at? Sacramento? I couldn't believe it. I was at the wrong airport. (both laugh)

DePue: This is really an intensive series of training sequences you had to go through.

Belton: Yeah, all three, the primary, the basic and the advanced was very intensive and quite speedy. You didn't waste any time. Well, they were needing people. Like you said, it depends a lot on the demand. (laughs)

DePue: Well, I would imagine that, somewhere along this line, you can't help but hear the news and notice that there are an awful lot of B-17 crews and B-24 crews that are being lost over Europe at that time.

Belton: Right, yeah, before I got there. See, I didn't get overseas until, I'm going to say December of '44. And they were losing. See, we done all the daylight bombing, and the RAF done all the night bombing. Of course, the daylight bombing was a lot more treacherous, because, after all, you can see the planes in the night. They used searchlights and all of that.

But the Germans were very adept at shooting you right out of the sky. If you'd fly your plane straight and level and give them three shots of an 88 [mm] battery on the ground, they'd knock you right out of the sky. We had to do diversive movement, all the way in and so forth.

DePue: By the time you got to advanced training, where was that?

Belton: Stockton, California.

DePue: Was that where you were starting to learn how to fly in formations, as well?

Belton: No, no, we didn't fly any formation there. I didn't fly any formation until I got into what they called transition training, in New Mexico, and there I was flying a B-17.

DePue: Was that the next step?

Belton: That was after graduation. We graduated in 44-E, and I got my wings and my commission. By the way, that was another high spot of my life. I couldn't wait until I got home to show off my wings, especially my wings. I still have my original wings. I managed to hang onto those.

DePue: The wings meant more to you than being a second lieutenant?

Belton: I think so. Yeah, they did.

DePue: Was Virginia there to pin on your wings?

Belton: She was there; she was there. And, by the way, as a little side note, they made a movie of our graduating class called, *Winged Victory*. That's... Oh, my Lord, I don't know. Well, back in '44. They had all of us standing on bleachers, taking pictures for the movie. I went to that movie three or four times, and I never could find myself in the picture. (laughs)

DePue: Was this a documentary that the military had made?

Belton: No, it was just a movie.

DePue: Really?

Belton: Yeah, in fact, Wes Dyker... I don't know if you've ever heard of his name?

DePue: Yeah.

Belton: Do you know Wes? This is a funny situation. We were out at UIS [University of Illinois, Springfield] one night on an interview with the country lawyer here in Springfield and Wes Dyker was there. I didn't know Wes, and here we had graduated in the same class. He was in the same class! I couldn't believe it. We've become friends, of course, over the years.

DePue: That's one of those small world stories.



Kenneth "Tuck" Belton's official Army Air Force photo, taken circa 1944 after he had earned his wings.

Belton: Yeah.

DePue: So that happened at, you say Roswell, New Mexico, where you got the advanced training?

Belton: After I got my wings and commission, I got to come home for two weeks, what they called a delay en route, and then went to Roswell, New Mexico for transitional training. That was in a B-17. There's where we had to solo. You got real familiar with B-17s and the take-off speeds and landing speeds and stalling speeds and a lot about the mechanical part of the hydraulic systems and the brake systems and the lights and bomb bay and the doors and the bombs and, you know, the whole affair. That's where we had to solo.

DePue: When you were doing the training on multi-engine, before, were they always two-engine aircraft that you were working with?

Belton: Yes, yes, that was in advanced training. The biggest plane we flew was two engines.

DePue: Were you hoping to get a B-17 or a B-24, or maybe a B-25 Mitchell, which is a two-engine, I think?

Belton: Well I don't know as I really give that a lot of thought. When I graduated, I just... They cut my orders and said to go to Roswell. That was all B-17 training there. Then I knew I would be flying B-17s in combat.

DePue: And most of those, I would think, were heading into England. The 8th Air Force was flying B-17s?

Belton: Yes.

DePue: What did you think of the B-17?

Belton: I'll tell you, that plane was a wonderful plane, not because I particularly flew that plane, but I'll tell you, those planes, they would fly on almost nothing. I've seen planes come back... Well, our first mission, over Hamburg, was sub [submarine] pens. We lost three crews that day, and we had six to seven holes in our airplane when we came back. The right flap was gone; a big section of the tail was gone, and we had a lot of problems, but that plane brought us back. I've seen planes in worse shape than that, after I was over in England, of course, come back from missions.

Well, I had a good friend, Olson was his name, a very good friend of mine. I went through cadet training with [him]. He lost two of his engines over Berlin, which was in quite deep. That was our deepest mission, I think, out of England. And he made it back. They crashed in England and took the steeple off of a church, I think, but he got the plane back. And I think all but

two of his crew members lived. That plane, that's a long ways to come back on two engines.

DePue: Wow. Well, that's a little bit ahead of our story, but (Belton laughs) it's fascinating to hear all of that. Did you start then to learn formation flying, when you were at Roswell?

Belton: Yes. We learned, well, a little bit of everything in Roswell. We had an instructor there, of course. I can't recall his name, but a nice guy. And it came time to solo the B-17, at night. Out there at Roswell, in those days it was just a little desert town. And about the only lights you seen was lights along the runway, to take off.

So, it came our time to solo, and he says, "Okay, you guys." Belt was my partner's name. And he says, "Get all set, and you're going to solo tonight." So we did and got our packs all on and everything and headed out to the plane. We're on the way to the plane, and I said, "Do you want to go first?" He said, "No." He said, "That's all right. You can go first." Well, we jockeyed; nobody wanted to go first, see? (laughs)

Anyhow, I finally ended up going first. I remember, of course, we had a long check sheet that you have to go through, everything, warm your engines up and all that. I recall sitting there in that pilot seat and looked down at that wing. The wingspan was only, what, 104 feet, as I recall. I thought, Holy mackerel, that's a long ways to that navigation light. I look out at the other one, over there, and I thought, I hope I can get this damn thing off the ground. (both laugh) But, we made it fine. I went up, and we had to come back and shoot a landing. I think I went up and shot two landings, and Bates had to take his turn.

DePue: Did you have a payload of some type to give you a feel for what it was like when it was fully loaded?

Belton: No, no. Those were B-17Fs, I think, we flew down there, earlier models of the B-17. No, we had no payload of any kind.

DePue: What was it like flying in formation? And why did they insist that you had the B-17s fly in formation?

Belton: Well the tighter formation you flew, the more firepower you had at enemy aircraft coming into the group. See, every airplane... We normally had about anywhere from fourteen to sixteen, seventeen airplanes in a group, because we went on bombing missions. And once we got in enemy territory, why everybody would tuck their wing in pretty close, because, like I say, you could get more of the fifty caliber machine guns on a fighter plane coming in.

DePue: Doesn't that make it an easier target for the flat gunners to hit, as well?

Belton: Yes, but that was your best protection. The more firepower you could get again, the fighter pilots.

DePue: Was there anything else, after Roswell, for you, in terms of training?

Belton: Oh, yeah, yeah, we trained...I don't know, we were in Roswell a couple of months or maybe three, whatever. I left Roswell, and I went to Lincoln, Nebraska to get my crew. [We] picked up our crew, and we went to Dyersburg, Tennessee for...What did we call that training, prior to going overseas? I can't recall what we called it.

And there, we started flying with payloads and shooting air to ground targets, air to air targets, shooting landings, flying round robins at night, and celestial navigation flights; our navigator would practice that. This was just prior to going overseas. (remembers) Phase training, they called that.

DePue: You said you went to Nebraska to pick up your crew. So you've got the navigator showing up, the bombardier, the gunners. I assume there's a radio man?

Belton: Yes, we had nine guys.

DePue: Did it include a co-pilot?

Belton: Oh, yeah, a co-pilot, bombardier, navigator and pilot, engineer, radio man, two ace gunners and a tail gunner, ball turret gunner.

DePue: Who determines, and how do you determine, who's the pilot, and who's the co-pilot?

Belton: Well, I was the pilot. I mean, that's determined for you. (laughs) I'm the pilot, and I don't know who made that decision. But Shanks, my co-pilot, he...I forget where, he didn't graduate out in California. I think he come from another neck of the woods; I don't remember just where. His name was Shanks, and he was the co-pilot. But Bogart was our bombardier, and Chillberg was our navigator. Could we take a little rest there?

DePue: You bet.

(pause in recording)

We're about ready to start here again. So, we took a short break, and we're back. Tuck, we just had you talking about, I guess, phase training is what you called it, in Dyersburg, Tennessee?

Belton: Yes, phase training.

DePue: And did you get more formation flying there?

Belton: No, we didn't get too much formation flying there, but we got a lot of combat-type flying. We flew with payloads. We'd use what we called blue bombs, and we'd bomb targets on the ground. They were filled with sand. And we'd have air to air gunnery and air to ground gunnery, shooting at objects on the ground and so forth. We had to make round robins, using celestial navigation, like, flying overseas, like over the ocean. The wind currents are very important, and a lot of times, the stars is all you've got to navigate by... Well, back in those days. Today, they're on the radio; they guide you. You just poke a couple buttons, and you don't have to worry about it, (laughs) like we called the automatic pilot, back in those days.

DePue: I'm curious about the air to air gunnery training. How did you test that? How did you do that?

Belton: Well, we'd have another plane; they'd be pulling targets, and your gunners would shoot at the targets.

DePue: You alluded to this before. I think if I were flying that target aircraft, I'd be a nervous guy.

Belton: Well, that's what they threatened us with, when we kept saying we wanted to be fighter pilots. And that's why I went multi-engine. (laughs) I didn't want to have to be pulling targets or shooting at targets, down in Arizona or wherever.

DePue: How long did it take for the crew to gel as a team?

Belton: Oh, let's see, in phase training, that was probably about two months, as I recall. Well, we had all kinds of training there, as I stop and think about it. We had a B-17 and a big pond of water. Everybody would get in their position, and they'd blow a whistle. You had to see how fast you could get out, and you had to operate the dinghies on the side, and everybody had their route to go out.

I remember, one time we practiced that, and the pilot was to go out the window on the pilot's side. I was supposed to be the last guy out. All these other guys were out, and they're supposed to have a dinghy waiting at the end of the wing there, as I slide down. Well, those ornery guys, the crew members of mine, I'm halfway down, sliding down... We was setting a pretty good record. They just pushed away from the wing, and I went in that mucky water! (both laugh) I got mad at the beginning, and then I... It was a lot of fun. (laughs)

DePue: While we were taking a break, you mentioned all the members of the crew. I'm just going to go through them real quick here, Lieutenant Shanks, Andrew Shanks, was the co-pilot; you mentioned him before. Bud Bogart was the bombardier?

Belton: Yes.

- DePue: Chillberg was the navigator? Then you had Sylvester Solomon, who was the engineer.
- Belton: Engineer, gunner. He operated the top turret on the—
- DePue: What does the engineer do, beyond—
- Belton: Oh, just watches all of the gauges and the hydraulic systems and the oxygen system. We'd have to have oxygen checks every so often to make sure everybody had their oxygen on. He just sort of watched over all the instruments, mostly hydraulics and that sort of thing.
- DePue: Rogan was the radioman?
- Belton: He was radio. We had a special little room for the radioman.
- DePue: What kind of radios did the B-17s have?
- Belton: Boy, I don't know what kind they were.
- DePue: When you were flying over Germany, were you able to communicate all the way back to England?
- Belton: Normally, after we got to certain places, you'd have silence. The group leader would say, "From here in, it's silent," so that you didn't give any warning to the enemy that you were coming in.
- DePue: Then the rest of the team was Neilsen as the ball turret gunner. That would be the job I wouldn't want to have.
- Belton: Yeah, I wouldn't want any part of that, either.
- DePue: Monroe was a waist gunner, and Williams was the tail gunner?
- Belton: True.
- DePue: I thought you'd have two waist gunners, though?
- Belton: Well, how many is that, nine on there or—
- DePue: That's nine.
- Belton: Yeah, okay. Some of them, before we went overseas, did have two waist gunners, but then they cut down on one of the gunners. We only had the [one]. I guess the theory, of course, sometimes the enemy aircraft can attack you from both sides at the same time. I don't know what their thinking was. You needed a waist gunner, really, on both sides. But they only had the one. (chuckles) Most of the planes in our group only had one waist gunner

DePue: That's still an awful lot of firepower in that aircraft.

Belton: Oh, yeah, yeah. That's why I say we would tuck our wing in there pretty close to inside the wing and the tail section of another B-17. The closer you could get, the more firepower you had and the more guns that you could put on an incoming enemy aircraft. That was the reason for close formation.

DePue: Was Virginia still with you through most of these phases of training?

Belton: She was with me all the way through phase training, until I went overseas. And then she went to live with her mother.

DePue: Where did you go after Dyersburg?

Belton: After Dyersburg, we went back to Lincoln, Nebraska. We were supposed to get a B-17 and fly over to England. On our orders to go, my crew and four other crews, the last five crews of the orders, they didn't have a plane for us. The rest of the guys in that particular order got B-17s and flew to England. They took the five crews—I being one crew—and they sent us to England on an ocean (chuckles)—

DePue: On a troop ship?

Belton: Oh, Lord, I'll tell you. Well, from Lincoln, we went to Camp Miles Standish. And that was a sort of a, what do they call those bases where you—

DePue: Port of debarkation, maybe?

Belton: Well, no, no, no. We left Boston; it was our port of debarkation. [It was] like an assembly place, where the crews and everything would all get together. We weren't there very long, just, well, I'm going to say, maybe a couple of days at the longest. Then they sent us by train to Boston, Massachusetts. We got on the USS Wakefield. It had burned to the waterline, and they had refurbished the plane. We had about 5,000 guys on that ship.

DePue: So, that sounds like it's much bigger than a liberty ship.

Belton: Oh, yeah; oh, yeah. We had about 5,000 troops on there, and it was a mess. It was really a mess. We hit a horrible storm. In fact, the storm was so bad, I and about maybe twelve or thirteen other guys had our big room that we were in, and we had to tie our B4 bags with ropes to keep them from rolling and breaking your arm, like a bowling ball, the ship was rolling so.

We hit this storm, I think, the second day out. Then we went way south. Two or three days out, we were not too far off the coast of the United States, trying to get around this storm. The ship was supposedly, I guess, fast enough that we didn't have to have a convoy. You know, we could outrun the subs and so forth.

DePue: Well it sounds like, if I was on that ship, I'd be miserable from the step. But I would think all that flight training and your stomach would have gotten used to being churned around.

Belton: Well, I'll tell you, I never got sick a day in my life, flying, before the war or during the war or after the war, and I almost died 1,000 times on that ship. Oh, I was so sick, so sick. You know, the rolling of the ship. And I wasn't the only one. It was just, you'd go into the heads and grab a wash basin. You'd be sick, and somebody else would come by and shove you right out of the way.

Somebody told me, he says, "Try eating a dill pickle." I ate a dill pickle, and I thought I was going to die, I'll tell you! It was so rough, they had the little boards you pull up, like on a naval ship, to keep your silverware and dishes on the table. Sometimes it was so damn rough, you'd go to take a bite of soup, and your soup ended up down here, and you were eating out of somebody else's bowl.

DePue: (laughs)

Belton: It was horrible. It really was. My crew, they had most all enlisted men, down in the lower quarters. And my crew was down real low. Monroe, he claimed that his bunk had a little...[It was] down low enough to be in the water. They raised Cain. I went, and I talked to one of the officers of the ship. But that was like talking...There wasn't anything he could do about it.

Every twelve or twenty-four hours, they'd take all the guys that were down in the ship, in the lower quarters, and put them up in the wind tunnels and so forth and then rotate them back and forth, so they didn't spend the whole time down below. My crew didn't like that. But they really hollered at me about it, but I couldn't do a thing about it. There's thousands of guys on there.

In fact, I was so happy to get to England, I was like the Pope. I went down the gangplank and got down on my hands and knees and kissed the ground. (laughs) I really did! Oh, I'll tell you, I was so...And after that was all said and done, I used to tell my wife how sick I got. And she says, "Now you know how I felt with our first child." (both laugh) She had a lot of sickness, you know.

DePue: Well, even before you got on that ship, how disappointed were you that you couldn't fly your own B-17 over there?

Belton: It was very disappointing, because everybody was looking forward to flying over. Of course, after that happened, there was nothing you could do about it. Like everything else, you followed orders.

DePue: I would think, though, that with the range of the B-17...Did you have to make a stop, somewhere between the United States and England?

Belton: Yeah, they usually stopped in—

DePue: Was it Iceland?

Belton: Where's Gander?

DePue: Newfoundland?

Belton: Is that in Nova Scotia? I think, somewhere up there. Then some of them did stop in...The president had a conference in Iceland. What was that city in Iceland?

DePue: Yeah, I know what you're talking about. That would have been early. Or are you talking about President Reagan's—

Belton: I don't know which president it was; one of them met somebody there.

DePue: Yeah, that was in Iceland.

Belton: In Iceland. Yeah, they had to stop in Iceland, some of them.

DePue: So you're excited once you finally do get to England. Did you stop in Ireland first or in England?

Belton: No, our ship went in to Southampton.

DePue: What was your impression of wartime England?

Belton: Well, (laughs) for some time, I didn't think too much of England. I had some experience. We had a lot of times, where they'd disperse our mission coming back, because of the fog and the rain and everything we had in England. Once we got diverted into...I forget where it was, another airfield, English airfield, and we had to eat in a certain line. We couldn't eat with the officers of the base where we were at. They fed us a different food and everything. That kind of got under my skin.

One thing, they always had peanut butter and beer, I think it was, or something; it was horrible. Anyhow, one night I know we...I can't remember what we had, spaghetti or something. And all the other officers in that club, they had another line they went through. I don't know why, but that kind of didn't go over very big with our crew.

DePue: When did you get to England?

Belton: When did I get there? In December of '44.

DePue: This is several months after D-Day. So it wasn't quite as crowded as it would have been before the invasion.

Belton: What do you mean, crowded?

DePue: Well, you know, leading up to the D-Day invasion—

Belton: Oh, you mean all the troops and everything. Oh, yeah, true, yes.

DePue: Where was your base then?

Belton: I was based in Deopham Green.

DePue: I've got a map here. It looks like, right here is Deopham Green. So, it's north of London.

Belton: Where's Norwich on there?

DePue: I don't know if we can find that.

Belton: Norwich is right on the sea. Cambridge—

DePue: There's Ipswich. I don't see Norwich on there. But here's where Deopham Green is supposed to be.

Belton: Oh, right there? Okay, Norwich would have been right here, about fifteen miles out from where our base was.

DePue: Right on the ocean?

Belton: Right on the sea, yeah, the North Sea.

DePue: Well, can you describe Deopham Green for us a little bit?

Belton: Well, Deopham Green was a wide place in the road. There wasn't much there. There was a little town called Hingham. And not too far from Hingham was another little town called Attleborough.

On our base, we had a little make-shift officers club, which was nothing more than a shack, put together where we could go and have a drink and so forth. Our colonel was the only guy that had a house to live in on the base, Colonel Batson, and—

DePue: I got this off the Internet. I don't know if that's what Deopham Green looked like when you were there. That's obviously an aerial shot of it.

Belton: It is. (chuckles) Well, after the war, Virginia and I was over in London, and I contacted a fellow that lives on the base or by the base, and we went to Attleborough and met him. He took us out and showed us the old runway and everything, and here's where you used to park your plane. He could have been telling me something...It had been so many years that the only thing...I didn't see anything that looked familiar. There was a little bit of the main tarmac left.

But two or three of the buildings had water in them. This was back in '78, I guess, somewhere back in there. He took us all through the base.

Him and his... As I understood it, his grandfather owned the land that the United States government took for Deopham Green base. There's bases all over England, of course, United States' bases. His grandfather owned a farm, and after the war, they had the privilege of... I don't know if they had to purchase, it or if it was part of the... What was that program that Marshall? Part of the—

DePue: The Marshall Plan?

Belton: Plan or something. Anyhow, they got the land back, and they divided it. One of the brothers raised pigs, and the other one had small grain on there. He took us around and showed us all that. He showed us Colonel Batson's house, and it was just in sorry repair. (chuckles) The old PX building had water in it. There wasn't much left. I told Martin, I said, "Well, Martin, you could have told me I parked my plane here, and I'd never know the difference." You know, it was so many years.

DePue: What was your unit that you were assigned to?

Belton: Four hundred and fifty-second Bomb Group.

DePue: Was there a squadron as well? What squadron were you in?

Belton: Seven hundred and twenty-eighth Squadron.

DePue: Seven hundred and twenty-eighth Squadron.

Belton: We had four squadrons on our group, the 728, 29, 30 and 31.

DePue: How many aircraft would be in a squadron?

Belton: Oh, about four or five. I don't know how many plans we had on the ground there, but we would normally put up about sixteen airplanes, on a mission. That would be all four squadrons.

DePue: So, four aircraft to a squadron. You said four squadrons—

Belton: Sometimes four, sometimes six.

DePue: To a group?

Belton: To a group, yeah.

DePue: And was there more than one group at Deopham Green, or just that one?

Belton: No, just our group.

DePue: What was the name of your aircraft?

Belton: *Lucky Lady*. It wasn't so lucky.

DePue: Did the aircraft have that name when you joined up with it?

Belton: It had that name. Yeah, see, we were assigned an airplane, once we got... We were what they called a replacement group.

DePue: So you're inheriting somebody else's aircraft?

Belton: Yes, yes.

DePue: How much training did you get, once you actually arrived there, before you started actually going on missions?

Belton: Oh, I'm going to say we got... Let's see, we got there in December. I got a couple of weeks, maybe a couple three weeks of training, all ground training, and had [it] to do [with] teaching us all about combat flying and how to get radio help, if we went down, and what to do in neutral countries, and what to do in enemy countries, if we were forced down, and all that sort of thing. I'm going to say, at least two weeks, maybe a little longer.

DePue: It sounds like your crew was the green crew, with a lot of very seasoned crews there already.

Belton: Oh, yeah. Well, we flew... Let's see, my first mission, I went as a pilot on another crew. Where did we go? I can't remember where that was. But the first mission I had with my crew was Hamburg, at the sub pens. [submarine pens, a type of submarine base that acts as a bunker to protect submarines from air attack.] I remember that very well.

DePue: So your first flight, when you go with another crew, wasn't that memorable for you?

Belton: No, everything went according to Hoyle. Well, it was just like the time when we went down. We were on a so-called "milk run" [a routine trip or undertaking] to Rennie, Germany. In the upper Ruhr Valley, we hit the marshaling yards.

We had [a] briefing before every mission. We'd have to get up early of a morning and have our briefing officers. We'd eat, of course, and meet in a briefing room. They'd show us the mission, and here's how you're going in, and here's your target; and here's your IP [initial point] and all that sort of thing. Supposedly, they would route us the best route to evade ground flak [ground fire] that they knew about. They weren't always accurate. (chuckles) Let's put it that way.

DePue: Well, the enemy got to move things around, too.

Belton: Well, after I went down and was over there in Holland, they'd pull the batteries in on flat cars on railroads. A mission would come in, and we'd stand down. I'd look at all those planes and wished I was up there. In the meantime, they'd pull a big train in, and they'd have, I don't know how many batteries, eight-eight millimeter guns.

Normally they'd come back out the same route, and all hell would break loose. They'd knock a plane or two out of the sky.

DePue: I've got a lot of different directions I could go. Let me start with this. From your perspective and what you were hearing, what was the bigger threat, enemy flak or enemy fighters?

Belton: Flak. Flak was very heavy. Well, that mission I was telling you about, to Hamburg, I tell you, we always said that it was so thick you could walk on it.

DePue: That was your first, actual mission?

Belton: Yes, uh huh, yeah. Flak was...I would say...I don't know what the statistics show, as far as the government is concerned, but flak got an awful lot of airplanes and weather. Weather took its toll.

DePue: Did you have American fighters that were accompanying you, when you went in?

Belton: Yes, yes, sometimes, sometimes. We didn't always have...P-51s were loyal friends and a few P-47s. In fact, I have a friend in Beardstown who was a P-47 pilot. I don't know if you ever contacted him or not.

DePue: I've never interviewed a fighter pilot from World War II. I'd love to do that.

Belton: He's from Beardstown. He's about my age, and he flew a P-47.

But anyhow, we would get P-51s, and it was always interesting, flying in on a mission, you'd see silhouettes of a fighter plane out, quite a ways out, and an ME-109, a German fighter, and a P-51 at a far distance. It was very difficult to tell which was which, until they got close enough that you could identify the plane, and a little cold sweat before you found out whether it was enemy or friendly. (laughs)

DePue: Well, that takes you back to practically the first thing you were supposed to be learning how to do.

Belton: In pre-flight training, yeah. A lot of things, I couldn't understand why...I thought were ridiculous at the time. Well, like for example, way back when, in our barracks in basic... Was it basic training? They'd blindfold us and tell us to

go pick up our grey belt or white socks or something. I thought that's the silliest thing I ever heard of. Well, you get in a B-17 at night, with all those instruments in front of you, you could see how that was very important, to know what was where.

DePue: And the last thing you wanted to do was turn some lights on.

Belton: Oh, no, no. (laughs) That's a no-no.

DePue: You started to talk about that pre-briefing experience. I wonder if you can walk us through what a typical mission would be, from the beginning to the end.

Belton: Well, it depended a lot on where the mission was. If it was a long mission, we'd have to get up very early in the morning. Some missions were what we'd call maximum effort. That means every group put up as many planes as they could. Sometimes that amounted to 2,000 airplanes to go on one bombing mission over Germany. They may have different targets, but that many planes on a mission. That would take us, sometimes, three to four hours to form on all of our different units.

See, when we'd take off, three minutes or so behind each other, and once we got up at like 10,000 feet or so, you'd start looking for purple flare guns, red, whatever, to find out who your leader was and get formed into a group, sometimes with 1,000 planes or maybe 1,500 or 2,000. Sometimes it took two, three, four hours to get all those formations together, before we cross the channel and go over Europe.

DePue: You're burning an awful lot of fuel while you're doing that.

Belton: That's the big problem, and sometimes, if you had a mission deep into Germany, and you turned around to come back home, and you hit a heck of a head wind, a lot of planes had to go down. They couldn't make it back, run out of gas.

DePue: Did you get any kind of resistance while you were over the English Channel, or did you start picking up the flak once you got into—

Belton: No, it was usually over the continent, yeah.

DePue: So, where did the enemy aircraft pick you up, the fighters, typically?

Belton: Well, anywhere, after you crossed the channel. It could be most anywhere. I seen them as Belgium. Well, I seen a lot of enemy fighters when I was in the Dutch underground. They were over Holland and Belgium and all those countries.

DePue: At what elevation were you flying?

Belton: We usually flew our missions around 25-26,000 feet.

DePue: How high up are you when you start to really need to have oxygen?

Belton: We had to put oxygen on at 10,000.

DePue: And you were over double that.

Belton: Oh, yeah; oh, yeah. Yeah, you didn't... Usually at... What did they tell us? At 30,000 feet, without oxygen, you're only good for about thirty seconds, before you became unconscious. I guess, they say that's an easy way to go. I don't know. But I have seen some guys, when we were in training, before we flew missions in England, we watched a couple missions come in, and a couple of horrible experiences. I was ready to come home before I ever got in the air.

But one of them was, as the missions come back, they'd shoot these different flares, different colors. Red was [priority] to come in first, out of gas, dead on board, whatever. And two fellows... I don't know what had happened, they took them off. They'd lost their oxygen. They were about the color of that thing there, black.

And then, one other thing, we were sitting in a big hangar over there, getting some ground training, and a mission... This was a few days after we were there, and they had this... You've got a lot of fog and mist, you know, and it would sometimes form ice on the runway. We always carried two chutes to throw out on the side to slow us down.

The runways were pretty short. And here come a mission back. The first B-17 came in. We're looking out windows there, in that building we were in. He threw out two chutes, but they went flying right off at the end of the runway and went forty or fifty feet, before the plane slowed down and then tipped, tipped up like so.

Anyhow, right behind him, here come another plane. He threw out his chutes, and the second plane went into the first plane. I think there was four guys killed. You know, it just chewed up the plane. The first plane came back down and left the Plexiglas nose on the ground. I think it was a bombardier, as I recall, [that] was in there. He looks up and sees what's happening. And, boy, he takes off, naturally. Then, here come the second plane in and—

DePue: Boy, if you didn't know it by—

Belton: That'll make you want to go home before you ever fly a mission! (laughs) The runways were real short. In fact, they were so short, when we'd take off with a full bomb load. Sometimes it was dark; sometimes it would be snowing, and you'd have to go by instruments, of course, until you got up out of the clouds.

You'd get down to the end of the runway, and you didn't know if you was going to get up or not. I'd always call for full flaps, and that was just like on an elevator, the plane would really rise up. You had to leave those flaps down for quite some time, or you'd sink right back down into the ground, until you got good flying speed.

DePue: So, you built up as much speed as you could, until you were right at the end of the...and then you went up pretty steep?

Belton: Yeah. You talk about using the wind and so forth...The first five minutes of take-off, they said, we used 450 gallon of gas. We carried about 2,400 gallon.

DePue: So just getting up, you're using a big percentage.

Belton: That was full power, hydros and everything on, to get up to height, well, whatever the distance would be.

DePue: What was the typical bomb load then? How much weight and how many bombs?

Belton: Oh, sometimes it was only 500. Sometimes it was 1,000, depending on the type of bomb, incendiaries or armor piercing or whatever. Sometimes those two huge bombs were...I think they were 500 pounds apiece, 1,000 pounds.

DePue: What was the overall bomb load? How many pounds could you carry?

Belton: I'm going to say about 1,500 or 1,800. The incendiary bombs were smaller bombs, and you could put, I think, four on the side, four on one rack and four on another rack. But those bombs are only so big around. The armament people took care of loading and arming all the bombs.

DePue: So that wasn't your crew's responsibility, to do that?

Belton: No, no, no, no.

DePue: It makes me wonder, did you or others think much about what was happening on the other end of those bombs, once they were dropping?

Belton: Yeah, I often thought I was sure glad I was on the upper end, because you knew that you'd killed a lot of people. In fact, when I was over there, they done what they called pattern bombing. Instead of going in on individual runs and bombing individually, we would go in as a group, and then everybody in that group watches your lead plane. Once we hit the IP—that's what they call the initial target—you hit an IP, and then you have to fly straight and level into the target, which might be quite some distance. Well, from there on in...Then the group plane will put his bomb bay open, and everybody in the group opens their bomb bay.

Then everybody sets there... The bombardiers, instead of individual bombing, they sit there on what we call a toggle switch. When you see the bombs come out of that group, that lead airplane, they toggle everything, and all the bombs of the whole group comes out. We could bomb like a one-mile square area, just pattern-bomb. You knew what was happening on the other end down there. A lot of people were going to get killed.

Of course, we were after certain targets, but there was... In fact, a friend of mine, Walt George, I don't know if you ever run into him, here in Springfield. He was a B-24 pilot, flew out of fifteenth Air Force and was shot down on [an air raid]. He was captured and taken to Munich and put in a POW camp.

I used to tell him how we bombed the marshaling yards in Munich. And he said, "Oh, you son of a guns!" he said. "We really sweat you guys out," because they put those... where they kept the prisoners, not too far from like the marshaling yards. And they would sweat out getting hit by bombs.

DePue: Did you wonder about how efficient or maybe how inaccurate the bombing raids were?

Belton: Well, from the time you hit the IP, you're always supposed to fly straight and level to the target. Well, sometimes the flak would be so heavy that you might do a little bit of evasive action. When you do that, and if your plane was in an attitude like so, and a bomb went out, it would be miles from the target, by the time it hit 25,000 feet below. And what it hit, who knows?

DePue: Well, there's been a lot of discussion since the war about how effective all of that bombing was. I guess that's the kind of questions I'm asking.

Belton: Well, it was effective. There's no doubt about that. You could look at the... We took pictures. They had planes that had cameras and so forth. Destruction was widespread, and especially on like marshaling yards, oil fields, bearing plants and important targets like that and sub pens. Without the bombing, the war could have gone on, I think, for a long, long time.

DePue: After you got rid of the payload, was it different flying the B-17?

Belton: Oh, yeah. Well, once you dropped all them bombs, you sort of felt the plane kind of... because, as the bombs went out, the plane would sort of rise a little bit. And then, we always done evasive action. Usually the group leader... The whole group would make a sharp turn left, a sharp turn right or whatever the mission called for, and you'd lose 500, 600, 700 feet altitude, trying to throw the antiaircraft guns off, until you could get turned around and headed back out.

DePue: Were the antiaircraft, the flak, the worst over the target areas, typically?

Belton: Yeah, most of it over...especially, depending on what the target [was]. Some targets were really...like the one in Hamburg, I was telling you, was really heavily defended. Some targets, there wasn't too much ground fire, but a lot of them were heavily defended.

DePue: Now, you made a comment earlier that surprised me. You made the comment that you'd oftentimes come back on the same route you went out on. I thought there would have been policy to always to come back on a different route.

Belton: Usually we did. But sometimes, like I said, the Germans weren't dummies. The Germans had good airplanes, good anti-air. That 88 millimeter gun was probably the best gun in World War II. And, like I say, they weren't dummies. It don't take them long to figure out what you're doing. They'd pull these flat cars in, with batteries of guns on them, to catch your planes coming back out.

DePue: Now, I know it was the fifth mission that you ended up getting shot down. But the other missions before that... You mentioned that the first mission the Lucky Lady went out on, you came back with plenty of holes.

Belton: Yeah.

DePue: Any problems in the second or third or fourth missions?

Belton: No, not too many. Well, we had flak. You always had a little bit of flak. There was some. Like I said, the mission we went down on was what we called a milk run. It wasn't supposed to have any flak or any fighters. Well, between the flak and a lot of other things that happened in our plane, we had a bomb we couldn't get out. The bomb wouldn't release from the bomb rack. And we had a hydraulic leak all over the plane. The engineer was working on it. And our number two engine went...it started running away, couldn't feather it. About the time, I remember I knew we were in serious trouble, and I remember picking up the mic and saying, "Let's get out of there," or whatever, and the plane blew up.

DePue: In mid-air?

Belton: Mid-air, yeah.

DePue: Did the rest of the crew get out?

Belton: No. Well, two others of the crew got out. According to witnesses in Holland, that I had nothing to do with. But there was two chutes opened, caught on pieces of our airplane, and, of course, it took them on down.

DePue: Does that mean that you're the only one who survived?

Belton: I was the only one that...And that's kind of a long story of why I survived. Normally... I was very fortunate there.

- DePue: Well, I certainly want to come back to this last mission that you ended up getting shot down on. But I did want to ask you a couple questions about the other missions, when you returned back to England. What was the routine? Was it tough landing, as well?
- Belton: No, no. You took your turn, took your turn, unless you had somebody injured or killed, or you were out of gas or whatever. And you would fire, say, a red flare, which would give you priority, coming in first. But normally, you'd come in, and you had a routine. Each plane would take its turn, coming in and landing.
- DePue: Once you got landed, was there a debriefing that you had to go through?
- Belton: Oh, yeah, yeah. There'd always be a debriefing. And once you'd landed and taxied to your...where your plane was stored, the ground crew took over then. Sometimes they had...Well, like that mission we came back on had a lot of little holes here and there. And the plane's ready to go the next day.
- DePue: Did you have the same people always doing maintenance on your aircraft?
- Belton: Ground crew, yeah. And you got pretty familiar with them, because they were important people. I can remember the...I don't recall his name. He says, "Now, when you bring Lucky Lady in, we don't want to see that plane bouncing very high." (both laugh) Yeah, the ground crew was...They didn't get recognition like the flying people did, but they were very important, very important. Your life was in their hands, really, because they maintained the plane and took care of it.
- DePue: So, did you as the pilot make sure that they were taken care of, as well?
- Belton: What do you mean, taken care of?
- DePue: Oh, I don't know, getting them a bottle of whiskey or—
- Belton: No, I wasn't there long enough. We had what they called a whiskey run. (laughs) I think it was...Where did they go? Scotland or somewhere. They'd take a B-17. I never was on the whiskey run, but I heard they'd assign a B-17 to go to—was it Glasgow?—somewhere in Scotland, as I recall. And they'd come back with a bunch of...What'd they call that? Black and white Scotch and some kind of...I didn't do much drinking in those days.

We had a...The story goes—and I don't know if it's true or not—that this crew left to go up and get a load of this whiskey to bring back to our base. They didn't come back for several days, and they were supposed to be back. The colonel had to go get them. (both laugh) I don't know if that's true or not, but it sounds good.

But, anyhow, we had a little, what we call an officers' club. It was just a little old shack, a little bar in there, and it had a light in back of the bar that had red and green on it. As long as the light was green, you could go in at night and have a couple of drinks. The green light meant no mission tomorrow. Some of those guys would sit there, and they'd have several drinks. And then all of a sudden, about 11:00, bang, that light goes red. That means a mission the next morning. Everybody heads for the sack, to try to get a little bit of sleep.

DePue: That's probably a good place for us to finish today. We're going to pick up the second part of the story, about the time you spent in Holland. That's an amazing story. But we're close to noon, and I know that both of us have to be going at that time.

Belton: It went by pretty fast. (laughs)

DePue: It did. Thank you very much, Tuck. This has been great.

(end of interview #1)

Interview with Kenneth "Tuck" Belton

VR2-A-L-2012-042.02

Interview # 2: Friday, November 16, 2012

Interviewer: Mark DePue

COPYRIGHT

The following material can be used for educational and other non-commercial purposes without the written permission of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. "Fair use" criteria of Section 107 of the Copyright Act of 1976 must be followed. These materials are not to be deposited in other repositories, nor used for resale or commercial purposes without the authorization from the Audio-Visual Curator at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, 112 N. 6th Street, Springfield, Illinois 62701. Telephone (217) 785-7955

Note to the Reader: Readers of the oral history memoir should bear in mind that this is a transcript of the spoken word, and that the interviewer, interviewee and editor sought to preserve the informal, conversational style that is inherent in such historical sources. The Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library is not responsible for the factual accuracy of the memoir, nor for the views expressed therein. We leave these for the reader to judge.

DePue: Today is Friday, the sixteenth of November, 2012. My name is Mark DePue. I'm the director of oral history with the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. And I'm in the home of Tuck Belton this morning. Good morning, Tuck.

Belton: Good morning.

DePue: We had a great session before. We've been struggling with equipment. It reminds me what you must have faced every single time you went up for a mission, when you were flying over war-torn Germany, back in 1945. I think you started the first mission in '45.

Belton: Forty-five, yes.

DePue: Last time, we talked about a lot of those missions, but I wanted to get you to start today with a little bit of discussion about sitting in the officers' club, waiting for the mission to come down. What was that like?

Belton: Well, our officers' club wasn't much. It was, I would say, just sort of a shack, like, and it was made for the officers. We had a little bar there. And we always had Black & White scotch and Irish whiskey. That's the two I remember. I didn't really care for either one. In that bar, we had a little box behind the bar that had a globe in it, with a glass in the front of it, and there was two colors, red and green. We'd go in to have a drink at night, if we had time and didn't have a mission that day or something. The light would be green, and that meant no mission tomorrow. So a lot of guys, they would really have a drink, and one drink, and two drinks, and so forth.

Then, about 10:30 or 11:00, bang, the red light would come on, which means we've got a mission in the morning. Everybody would high-tail it back to their barracks and try to get some sleep before we had to get up at about... Well, not every morning, but some mornings, on long missions and briefings that were long, we had to get up about 3:30. I can remember, [that was] about the earliest, because we had to go eat, have breakfast and briefing and dressing and out to the plane. It takes a lot of time to get ready to go on a mission.

DePue: What kind of gear did you have to strap on when you actually went on a mission? What all was included?

Belton: Well, when we got to the plane, we had our flying suits on. And we had to... I wore long underwear, thank God. [It] come in very handy later on. But we had our flying suit on. Underneath our flying suit, we had electric suits; the legs and the waist buttoned into each other and made a circuit, and also boots. And that was run by electricity on the plane. On top of that, we had our flying suits. And then, when we got to the plane, of course, we had oxygen masks.

We didn't go up any at night-time. We went up in the dark, but it was early morning. We didn't put our oxygen masks on, usually, until we hit about 10,000 feet, as I recall. They said the average flyer could have pretty good knowledge of what was going on, up until about 10,000 feet. But, as you were denied oxygen from there up, your judgments and so forth were affected.

Then, of course, before we got to the target, we'd put on flak suits and oxygen masks. I always felt like a big zombie when I got all that on. I don't know how much I weighed.

DePue: Did you have parachutes on, or did you only put those on in the event of a disaster?

Belton: Well, we had parachutes. We used chest bags. And, of course, the pilot and the co-pilot couldn't wear the chest bag, because it was right in the way of your flying. A friend of mine from Texas, another pilot, came over a couple of days before our mishap, and he told me how to rig a parachute that would always be tied to me, no matter what happened. He said, "Sometimes I hear of these guys that get blown out of an airplane, that are out there in mid-air, and it's quite embarrassing without a parachute." (laughs) I said, "I understand that."

But anyhow, he came over and showed me how to take some gas pipe and bend it and so forth, cut the shoulder straps and hung the weight of the chute on—our seats were steel—and hung the weight of the chute on there, so it wasn't pulling down on his shoulders. The shoulder strap was oh, five feet long, maybe six feet long. And I had that with me the day that our plane exploded. That's the reason I can tell you this story today.

DePue: Did you have any kind of a side arm with you?

Belton: We all carried .45s [.45 caliber handguns]. I really couldn't hit that wall with a .45. It wasn't a weapon...I don't know why we carried them. I was told by other fliers, if you go down in enemy territory, the first thing you do is throw that .45 away, because it will get you nothing but trouble, if you went down where there were German soldiers. But my .45 is in a museum in Midwoud, Holland today.

DePue: Wow. How about the other things that might come in handy, if you did have to bail out, like a first aid kit or a knife of some type or canteens or any rations?

Belton: Well, we had little kits, but I didn't have anything as I went out. Well, I went out unexpectedly; let's put it that way. I didn't plan that, and I didn't have anything with me, period, other than my parachute, which was dangling about five feet above my head. When I went out, I was unconscious, I guess. I don't remember that. But I remember waking up in space, and the chute was dangling about five feet above me.

DePue: Last time we met, you did talk a little bit about what happened on that last mission. And you just mentioned it again today. But I'd like to have you kind of lay out that story in as much detail as you can remember for us.

Belton: Well, after all these years, the details are a little sketchy, but the mission was to Rennie, Germany, a small...I don't remember how big the town was, but our mission was to bomb the marshaling yards at Rennie, Germany. Rennie, Germany is in the north end of the Ruhr Valley.

Our mission was supposed to have been what we call a milk run. In other words, we shouldn't find much flak, ground fire, and we didn't expect any enemy fighter planes. However, we got to the target okay and hit the IP, which is the point where all the planes fly straight and level, until you drop your bombs over the target. When we dropped our bombs, we had a...Well we got hit by some flak, on the way in on the IP. It had done some damage, and we had a bomb tied up in the bomb bay.

We had all kinds of things happen. We had a bomb tied up that we couldn't get out, and they were trying to kick that out. The bomb bay doors were still open. The number two engine developed trouble and was running away, and I couldn't feather it, for some reason. I tried to feather it, but couldn't feather it.

DePue: Was that on the port or the starboard side?

Belton: That was the first engine on the left side, on the port side. Anyhow, I was afraid the prop would spin completely off. If it did, it could come through the airplane, spinning like that. However, I don't think it did. Then anti-aircraft had hit a hydraulic line, and we had a lot of hydraulic fluid all over the front end of the plane, where the pilot and the engineer was. He was trying to take care of that problem. It just seemed like everything happened at one time. We had turned, and we had lost altitude, and we lost our contact with the rest of the group.

I was just about ready to...Well, in fact, I had picked up the mic to say we're going to have to get out of here, and the ship exploded. I don't know, to this day, if that bomb exploded, flak hit us or what. But anyhow, the next thing I knew I was floating around in the air, with my parachute hanging about five feet above my head.

DePue: When you say you needed to get out of here, leaving the formation or just bailing out of the aircraft?

Belton: Oh, bailing out of the aircraft, yeah. No, we'd already lost the contact with the rest of the group of the mission.

DePue: Well, pick up the story from there then...hanging in the middle of the air.

Belton: Hanging in the middle of the air. I don't know, I guess for the first few seconds or whatever, I was unconscious, because when I regained consciousness, that's when I realized I was out in the air. And, of course, I

could see the chute. I tried to pull... Well, I got the chute down. I pulled it down.

We have two, what we call d-rings, that fasten the chute on your chest. The one d-ring, of course, was fastened that I had the chute attached to me. And I guess, due to the shock or whatever you want to call it, I could never get the other d-ring fastened. I panicked, I guess would be the best way to say it, because I didn't know how long I'd been out there. All I could see was a heavy undercast of clouds. I didn't know how high I was.

I thought, well... One thought went through my mind. I thought well, at least with that undercast, the Germans can't shoot at me, because I didn't know for sure... Under the stress of everything, I didn't know for sure where we were. I knew where the target had been, and we had come back, but I didn't know if we're still on the continent side or where.

But anyhow, I panicked, and I pulled the chute with the one d-ring on there. And, of course, I'm spinning. I had no control over the chute at all, with the one shoulder strap. You couldn't control your spinning or anything. And I went into the clouds. The next thing I knew, the clouds were only about... I have always estimated about 400 feet off the ground.

The next thing I knew, I'm on the ground. So I guess, in my panic, I guess it was wise to pull the chute. At least I had the chute open when I hit the ground, and we had about... Oh, there was three or four inches of snow on the ground. When I hit the ground, like I say, I was spinning. And that's how I injured my back. The chute stayed inflated with the wind. It was a little windy. And it pulled me, I'm going to say twenty, twenty-five feet in the snow. And then finally, it collapsed.

I'm laying there, trying to put everything together, what happened and where I'm at and so forth and so on. Pretty soon here comes a bunch of eight or ten people, across the field. There's a small, open field there. They were Dutchmen. But at the time, I guess I just couldn't think clearly, and I didn't know for sure where I was at. And here come these people up, and I seen some of them have those wooden cloggers on. I thought, I must be in Holland. I'd always seen their wooden shoes.

I was very, very fortunate, not only this time but many, many times after this, that two of the underground fellows, a fellow by the name of Peter Dudink and Trenk. What was Trenk's name? Trenk was a code name; I can't recall his last name. Trenk, T-r-e-n-k. They were going through this town, travelling through this town on bicycles; that's all they had to use. And they had seen all this happen and parts of the plane come down.

So they stopped, and the natives drug me into a farmhouse at the edge of the village. They got in there, and they're all talking. And, of course, I don't

know what they're talking about, but [they're] all excited and everything. And the woman—I guess she's the wife of the farmer there—she started screaming and going on. She was telling the rest of them—I found out about this later—that to get me out of there, because she said there's a German detail coming down the road. And she didn't want me to be found in her house, for maybe reparations by the German forces.

So, these two guys, they took me out of the house. I wasn't getting around very well. I'd injured my back; I couldn't walk. I didn't realize how much injury I had, at the time. And they took me out, and they were saying...I've got to remember some of the words, *fiets, fiets*, going on about *fiets*, which was a bicycle. Finally, they went through the body motions and wanted to know if I could ride a bike. I nodded my head, yes.

So they set me on this bicycle, and I just fell over in the road. I couldn't manipulate the bicycle at all. So, they picked me back up, put me on the bicycle and down the road we went, down through the snow on the road. I recall that, one guy on one side and one guy on the other side. They pushed me down. We must have gone a mile, maybe more. I don't recall exactly.

They took me into a bulb barn. That's where they stored tulip bulbs, and it was cold. It was January. They took me into this barn. And following us was a couple, three other Dutch people. We got in this tulip barn, and right away they wanted me to take all my clothes off and get rid of my clothes. There was a fellow there, a Dutchman, who was taking his clothes off, and he's giving me his clothes. He's taking my clothes. I took everything off, except my long underwear that I mentioned a while ago, which was a god saver for later on.

But anyhow, I stripped off, and I put on these Dutch clothes and, believe it or not, a pair of Dutch, wooden shoes, which was horrible. (chuckles) The snow was over the wooden shoes. Then they put me back on a bicycle. This didn't take very long. Later on in the story, I met the man that gave me his clothes. I met his wife and his family. And he asked me if I remembered the day that we changed clothes in the bulb barn. He said, I'm the fellow that give you the clothes and so forth. I was just astounded.

I had so many things that astounded me. This was back when I went on that reunion. But anyhow, they took me on a bicycle, down the road another two or three mile, I don't know. [We] went to a farmhouse, who the Dutch Underground knew was people that were friendly to the Dutch Underground. They took me in the farmhouse and up in the sort of attic-like, what I'd call an attic. It was quite large. And they left me there. They left.

The lady, the farm woman, she brought me up porridge. I stayed in that attic for about a couple of days. I think they were trying to figure out for sure I was an American flyer. See, the Germans had a habit of taking B-17s

that had been downed over in enemy territory and flying over, like Holland, dropping out people, their people, trying to infiltrate the Dutch Underground. And they wanted to make sure.

But they had seen the plane and all the parts and had seen, as I understand it. I don't know, I was never back to the site. But two of my crew had gotten out of the plane and opened their chute, but the chutes had caught on parts of the airplane, so they didn't make it.

DePue: So you're the only one who survived?

Belton: I was the only, sole...I didn't know it at the time, but I was the only survivor.

DePue: Do you know if your co-pilot got out? He'd be the only other person you probably would have seen, when it occurred.

Belton: Well, if I am not mistaken, I remember him getting out of the seat, the co-pilot's seat, because we were getting ready to abandon the ship. But I don't know, I don't know who it was—

DePue: At the time you were bailing out, did you have any concerns about maybe we're going to be over water; maybe we're not even over land?

Belton: Well, when I bailed out, I didn't even think about that, to tell you the truth. I never thought too much about that, until sometime after all of this was over with, and I got to look at some maps. That was back in the days when they had the *Zuiderzee*,⁷ if you remember that. And that was turned into a polder, of course. I was between this here and the North Sea.

DePue: Yeah, we're looking at a map here, I printed out. What's the name of this town that you were close to, Oostwoud? Is that how you say it?

Belton: Well, close to that, but Midwoud. It's not on here, M-i-d-w-o-u-d. It's close to Oostwoud.

DePue: So you weren't that far away from water on either side of this small peninsula?

Belton: No, I was roughly right in here.

DePue: Okay, right in this.

Belton: I was south of Hoorn, and I was south of Alkmaar. It don't give some of those other towns. I'm guessing, with this map, right like so.

⁷ A shallow inlet of the North Sea in central Netherlands reclaimed as a polder, or tract of low land protected by dikes. (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zuiderzee>)

DePue: Well, I'm going to go back and ask you a couple other questions, because this is happening in January of 1945. I guess my question is, you had to be paying attention to the news of the war. What were your thoughts and your buddies' thoughts when the Germans had that massive winter offensive that we now know as the Battle of the Bulge?

Belton: Well, it's funny you mention that. During a part of the Battle of the Bulge, I was with Dutch Underground people, and we were trying to work our way to South Holland, to get me out of there. I didn't know the Battle of the Bulge was going on. We had no news, very, very, very little news of what was going on, but—

DePue: Even when you were back in England?

Belton: Oh, no, no. This is while I was still in Holland.

DePue: The Battle of the Bulge, though, started before Christmas of 1944. So you would have caught the tail—

Belton: The tail end.

DePue: You were about at the tail end of it.

Belton: The tail end of it, yeah. And one thing I noticed was a lot of German equipment moving. I didn't know what was going on. I thought to myself, well, if it's like this on the ground all the time, I'll like to get back in the air to get away from all this. But that was just a little side note there, that I remembered.

DePue: What happened after those first couple days? Apparently they got more comfortable that you were an American.

Belton: Okay, I'll go back to the farmhouse, where I was in the attic. They came in a couple of days. It was a couple three days; I don't recall just how much. After almost seventy years, your memory sort of fades a little bit. They came back, and they got me. I still wasn't able to do much walking. They put me on the bicycle again and took me all the way to the duck decoy, where our headquarters were for the North Holland Resistance Forces. And I stayed in that.

The picture you have of the drake [Lars] Jonsson [Swedish illustrator] painted, that was only half of the building, and don't ask me why he didn't paint the other half. Maybe it was gone; I don't know. But the half that he showed, we had a table and chairs in there, where we sat. And we had knobs or whatever you want to call them, where we'd hang our ammunition and our guns and rifles, mostly rifles. Then the other half of the building, which was just like the half you've seen, we slept in that half, had straw on the ground, and we slept in there.

DePue: Was it a chicken shack? That's what I saw somewhere.

Belton: That's what I called it, but it was close to a duck decoy. Do you know what a duck decoy is? This farmer, Mr. Gannes—I think you mentioned his name in the sheet there—he's the man that owned the farm, where the duck decoy was behind his farm, way back in rural Holland. Muddy roads and a very difficult place to get to. He was in the business of retrieving wild ducks. He had tame ducks, and he had these...not sloughs, what do you call the little bodies of water, like so?

DePue: Canals?

Belton: Well, very, very small, not a canal but, they were built with nets over there. The tame ducks would get the wild ducks to come and land in these little, small canals, and he would trap them with nets. He'd sell them to the Germans. That's where we got most of our food. We ate duck almost...well, quite a lot. I don't know if he knew we were taking the ducks or not. But that's all we had; we didn't have much to live on, out in the rural area there, while we lived in that chicken shack.



Painting of the "Chicken House" in rural Holland where Belton hid out with the Dutch underground from January 20th to March 1st, 1945. The oil painting was done by Ab A. Jansen of Oudorp, New Holland, Netherlands, and presented to Tuck Belton on the occasion of his visit to Midwoud, New Holland in May/June of 1978.

DePue: When you were there, you said "we." Who were the other people there?

Belton: Well, there were twelve people there. I can't recall...Trenk was one of them, I remember, and Peter, Peter Dudink and Steve Meyer and Ted Loughlin—

DePue: Are these other downed pilots, or are these Dutch?

Belton: No, no, no, these were all Dutch patriots, Dutch Resistance forces, all of them.

DePue: Except for you. You're the only one that's—

Belton: I was the only American there. We had one lady, who was a school teacher. She done courier work. She'd take messages from one group to another group. That was their only means of communication between the underground groups. And the big guy, Kick, Kick Boer(??) and Cowboy Ted, Steve Meyer—

DePue: Even Cowboy Ted? That's a Dutch person?

Belton: Yeah, that's a Dutchman. That was a nickname we gave him, Cowboy Ted. It's quite an interesting story. I don't know if you want to hear about it or not.

DePue: Sure.

Belton: Cowboy Ted, he was truly a Dutch patriot, as most of them were. He had killed a German officer. This was before I got there. But he had retrieved the German officer's black overcoat, black boots and all the rest of the uniform. Anyhow, (laughs) I don't know where he got the guns. He had a Smith and Wesson, two of them, one on each side. That's where we nicknamed him "Cowboy Ted," because Smith and Wessons were guns from over here. And then he had a little ammunition belt around his chest, and he had four hand grenades that was underneath his overcoat. We called him the walking arsenal. (laughs)

He was the type of guy that was looking to encounter the Germans. You know what I mean? I don't mean he'd just run out and try to defeat them. But he was all...One habit he had, every little town we'd get in— not little town, but any size—he'd always say... What was my nickname? Bill. He'd always say, "Hey, Bill, do you want to go see Gestapo headquarters?" Oh, no, I don't want to go see... I don't want to even get close to Gestapo headquarters, because I was in civilian clothes. I knew, if I was captured then some way, somehow they would find out who I was; I was in serious trouble.

They knew that also. That's why they equipped me the way I did to get me through Holland, with my uniform. They even took me in to a little place that took my photo. I got my identification card. I salvaged that. And they had my name, William Shank. I was a bookbinder, and I lived at Westerside 22. This was on the identification.

And I was d-o-o-f-s-t-o-m, *doofstom*, which means deaf and dumb. I wore a big badge, about probably—I don't know, almost the size of that big cookie thing there—that said *doofstom*. That meant deaf and dumb. The reason for that was I couldn't speak the language, of course. And if we had any encounters with the Germans, they'd see the *doofstom*, and they didn't bother me too much. However, I got in a couple of close calls, even though with the *doofstom* badge. We were cycling... Well, maybe I'm getting ahead of the story. This was—

DePue: Well, let's go ahead and talk about it, and then we can fall back here a little bit.

Belton: Well, this happened in Amsterdam. I met a young girl there. Her family had moved over there in '39, just prior to the occupation of the Germans in Holland. He was a doctor. They were a prominent family and had a home in Amsterdam. She would take me to...It [her family's home] was all boarded up; they were all gone. She was in the underground, and the family didn't know where she...See, the brothers and sisters and the people that were in the underground, they didn't know where the other people were, and they all went by code names. So, if they were captured, the Germans couldn't get any information out of them, as to where their brother was or their sister, mother, father and so forth.

So, she took me over to her home. She had a way to get in. They had English books. I'd take them back to our headquarters in Amsterdam, and I had something to read. So, we're coming back one day, on the bicycles. That's all we had over there, and they weren't in very good shape. But we were coming through Dam Square. That's right in front of the palace in Amsterdam.

Of course, the country and the cities were full of German soldiers, because they were occupied. I don't know how many Wehrmacht soldiers were in Amsterdam, but there were quite a lot of them. Some of them, I think, came in for a two or three-day leave and so forth. But we had pulled up, and I caught my pant leg in the bicycle chain. There was people all around. I just didn't think for a second, and I said, "Hey, wait a minute!"

As soon as I said it, I froze, because I thought, oh, oh. Of course, I started to put my neck on a swivel to see if anybody had caught that, which they didn't. I got down, and boy, I'll tell you, I was trying to get my pant leg out of that chain. I finally just tore it out. I looked up, and the gal I was with, she was down the road.

You were on your own. When something happened, everybody was on their own, and this came true in another case or two. But she was about a quarter of a mile down the road, because she didn't want any part of it, if I got picked up. But no one paid any attention, so I got my pant leg free. I caught her, and we went back to headquarters in Amsterdam.

DePue: How did you communicate with your other underground members, when you were in the chicken shack?

Belton: Well, with a lot of difficulty. I didn't speak any Dutch whatsoever. However, Steve Meyer was the youngest guy in the Dutch Underground. He's the fellow that's in the book that my son-in-law met at my forty-fifth wedding anniversary, here in Springfield. Steve was telling him how I had helped to get

him out of the hospital, where he had been injured and put in the hospital. I got sidetracked there. What was I talking about?

DePue: The language difficulty.

Belton: Oh, the language difficulty, yeah, very difficult in the shack there. I laid in that straw for about a couple of weeks. I couldn't maneuver very much. I had injured my back, and I've had repercussions of that to this day. But anyhow, after a couple of weeks, I got up where I could get around. I'd lay there, and it was cold, no heat and snow on the ground. The door would be open. I'd look out there, a couple mornings, and here were those guys, they'd have their sleeves rolled up, and take a little snow and, for the moisture, and kind of wash their hands. And I thought, oh my God.

Well, after about three weeks, guess what? I was out there (laughs) doing the same thing. But in the meantime, Steve could speak a little English.

(telephone rings)

Steven Meyer—Just let it ring—he helped me quite a lot. He was watching me. Well he wasn't watching; he came upon a German soldier in Nijmegen, who was raping a Dutch girl. And he slipped up behind the German soldier and jerked his sidearms out and shot him and killed him. His folks wanted to get him out of there and get him up to North Holland. That's where I met him, in the decoy in North Holland.

Steve became one of my best friends. He had a lot of health problems. He got shot up quite a lot, lost a lung over there, due to an injury. It was real close; he got in some kind of combat with some German soldiers, and they were chasing Steve, and he fell over a little stone wall. He [Steve] had been shot, and the German soldier was up and going to shoot him again. Jack, another one of the Dutch Underground, Jack Strode—he's from Australia—he came up behind the German and shot the German before he could kill Steve.

But Steve was in bad shape, and he ended up in a small hospital. Oh, I don't know. It was in Bolen(?)_Hospital or Eikhausen(?); I don't recall. It wasn't a very big town. They had a little...I think it was maybe a two-story, small building. It was a hospital, and that's where Steve was.

I was with the group, out in the decoy, that went in to...See, they put him in the hospital, and we knew what was going to happen to him. So, we decided that...I didn't decide, the commander, Flip Flootman(?) was our commander. He was a schoolteacher. He never, ever made it to the U.S., but I was at his home several times. [I] stayed over with him a couple, three days and so forth, a very nice guy. I could tell you some of the experiences that he had. But anyhow, we went in to get Steve out of the hospital. And I didn't know...I could get a little of an idea of what was going on, but I didn't know

much about the Dutch language yet. I was up and able to go with them. So I went with them on this. They were going to get Steve out of the hospital.

(telephone rings)

That's a cell phone; don't pay any attention to it. Anyhow, we got to the hospital, and they stationed me on this one. I had an English Sten [submachine] gun. That was my only weapon. I was stationed here, and I don't know who was on the other end. Some of the guys went into the hospital to get Steve out. Well, in the meantime, here come a German soldier and a Dutch Quisling who... The Quislings were the Dutch people that sided with the Germans, thinking they'd get a better treatment or something to eat with the Germans rather than... The Dutch Underground didn't have much sympathy for those people, naturally.

Well, here they came, and they seen me. This is the first time I was ever face-to-face with somebody that meant them or me. I didn't know what to do. No one had instructed me; [they'd] just posted me there. When he started drawing his sidearm, well I just opened up with my Sten gun and shot both of them. When I did, all hell broke loose. The guys came pouring out of the hospital. They got Steve, and I just took off.

I just took off; I didn't know what to do. I know I didn't want to stay there. I went out through a field of snow and hid on the ground. There was like a small group of trees, and I run into there and stayed there for quite a while. Later on that evening, it started getting dark. It was in January. Days, like here, are not too long. And I thought, oh, man, what have I done? I was all by myself.

About that time—I think this story is in the book, about this dog that came along, this big old shaggy dog—I guess he was probably as frightened as I was. I called him, and he came over to me. I petted him and everything. I stuck him underneath that overcoat, and he was one reason I kept alive that night. He helped keep me warm. We spent the night in that grove of trees, in the snow, until the next day. And the guys from our commander, they found me and took me back to the decoy.

That was a harrowing experience. I didn't know if I was going to make it through the night or not. It got pretty damn... even with the dog. I can't remember, I think we took that dog back to the decoy with us. And I think we had the dog there in the shack for a while. But I can't remember what happened. We had to move out of there one night at midnight. The Germans found out where we were. I can't remember if the dog was still with us or not. My memory isn't that good.

DePue: A couple of questions about what it was like, living in the shack. You mentioned duck; what else did you have to eat?

Belton: Not too much. We had a few potatoes. And I think it was there, we ate a few tulip bulbs. Tulips were the big—and still is—the big agricultural product of Holland. They ship flowers all over the world, tulips especially. And everybody had tulip bulbs and fields of tulips, everywhere. We ate a lot of—

DePue: Did you cook them or eat them raw?

Belton: We boiled them. We boiled them. We'd build a little fire and boil them. They really didn't need... It was sort of like an onion, the make-up of a tulip bulb, but it didn't have the flavor an onion had. It was just a blah flavor. I didn't like them at all. But, when you have to eat something, you'll eat whatever. We ate a lot worse than tulip bulbs, while we were there. But anyhow—

DePue: Did the shack have any heat?

Belton: No, it had no heat. We posted a guard every night. The night Trenk was our guard—I don't remember—he fell. He slipped... He had a rifle, and he was, guarding on the outside of the shack. And he fell down and fired his rifle, whoosh. The whole damn gang went out, because we didn't know what was going on. Of course, after it was all over with, it was a sort of a big laugh to all of us, because he had fell and created all that excitement. But that was exciting days.

Well, at that time, you didn't know what was going to happen, because you knew the Germans would like to capture us, because the North Resistance Forces were the only ones that were giving them any trouble in Holland. The regular civilian population had no way of doing anything, even if they wanted to. That's who suffered the most.

DePue: I'm going to take a break right now, because you've gotten three phone calls. We're going to put a stop to the phones ringing, and let you figure out what's going on.

(pause in recording)

We took a little bit of a break, and we're back at it. I had a couple more questions about while you were in the shack, with the rest of these underground members, all Dutch apparently, except for yourself.

Belton: All Dutch.

DePue: You mentioned that one of them, though, was from Australia?

Belton: Yes. Well, he was a Dutch citizen then. He migrated to Australia after the war. Steve, my best friend, he also came to America after the war.

DePue: I wondered if you were able to follow any of the war news while you were there in the shack.

Belton: No, I don't remember hearing a thing. Anything that we got was done by courier, and that was usually what was happening to other groups of the underground and so forth. But I don't recall... Well, no news, but I did see our planes going over, on missions. I remember that.

DePue: Well, I'm thinking that, in November of 1944, there had to be a lot of Americans and Brits who were thinking, the war's almost over. We're getting close to Germany. This thing is going to end eventually. And then, of course, the Battle of the Bulge happens, and maybe that equation reverses. But did you have any doubts at that time, who would be victorious at the end of the war?

Belton: No, as I recall, on our missions, we had talk with the different people, intelligence and so forth. They talked like that we were winning air supremacy over the Germans.

Just as a little extra side note, a mission or two—I don't remember, I only had five, but anyhow—on one of those missions, something had hit us and took a plane out of the group. On our briefing, when we come back, they'd ask us all kinds of questions. Nobody could tell them what it was. The Germans had jet planes, right at the end of the war, very, very short range. That's what had been hitting these different groups, and nobody knew what was going on.

DePue: Well, one of the other questions, you'd just gotten married before you came over to Europe. Were you concerned about what Virginia and your parents were thinking about what happened to you?

Belton: I was very concerned, but I was helpless, as far as getting any kind of a message out. I couldn't get a message to my wife, Virginia, for, well, until I got a... I'm trying to remember if I sent her a telegram when I got to Brussels, after we got back to the lines or not. It might have been in Paris, before I could send her a telegram.

By the way, those folks at home didn't have an easy go, either. Her brother, Merle, on January 20th was killed in a foxhole in Luxembourg. They got a telegram from the War Department. She was living with her mother in Chicago. The very next day, they get a telegram that I'm missing over Germany, two days in a row. So, they had it pretty... It wasn't an easy go for them.

DePue: And I would guess that if the Germans had captured you, they would have notified the Red Cross, and somebody would have gotten information that you were a POW [prisoner of war].

Belton: They're supposed to. That's a rule of war—What do they call it—that was set by the League of Nations, I think.

DePue: The Geneva Convention.

Belton: Yeah, the Geneva Convention. That's what I'm trying to think of, yeah.

DePue: Well, you mentioned, when we took this quick break, that there was another very hair-raising experience you had in the chicken shack.

Belton: Well, somebody in our group got word that they [the underground] had a bazooka, and they wanted to teach us how to use it. There would be an American soldier of some kind that was supposed to... And they had the arrangements. They was supposed to meet us in this little building, in this town. I don't remember the town; it wasn't too far from where our shack was. So, we were supposed to go in there to learn how to use a bazooka. I didn't know anything about a bazooka.

But anyhow we get in there. We had the weapon. So, we had the weapon. I don't remember how they got it. And this American was supposed to teach us how to use it. You know, you hold it over your shoulder and so forth, rocket and... Well, we waited and waited, and no one showed and no one showed.

So, some of the guys were fiddling around with this bazooka. They had the rocket in it and everything. I guess they took it off the safe or whatever, and for some reason or another, the thing got fired. It went up through the ceiling, and I thought we'd had it. Man, I'll tell you, almost half the building come down, and the guys started running out. That was what I was telling you about [that] was another harrowing experience.

Then we had to learn how to use the bazooka on our own. We used to go out, and no one over there in Holland had automobiles, except the German officers. They had '38 Fords, with those charcoal burners on the back end. We would take that bazooka and lay in the ditch. Here would come a car down the road. There wasn't many, of course, but we knew who'd be in there. We'd hit that car with the bazooka rocket, and you couldn't even find a piece of tire. Well, those bazookas could knock a track off of some of the tanks. So they were quite powerful. So, we used the bazooka in that little way, to get even with the Germans.

DePue: I'm envisioning that the shack that you're living in is pretty much out in the middle of nowhere. There are not a lot of buildings that sit close to it?

Belton: Oh, no. We were in behind a farmhouse, probably 1,000 feet behind a farmhouse. And there was just this decoy that I told you about, where the guy had the duck strips. I can't think of that name. But, no, there was nothing back there at all. It was in a very rural area. The road up to that farmhouse, at that time, was just mud.

Mr. Gones, I went back to visit him after the war and spent time out there where the shack was. It's sort of an interesting story. I might get to it, maybe, pretty soon, about part of my flying suit.

DePue: Well, go ahead.

Belton: Well, this was back in... We went over there in '78, to the reunion.

DePue: Well, let's go ahead and hold off on that for now then.

Belton: Okay, that's what I thought.

DePue: Were the Germans actively patrolling in the area where you were living?

Belton: I don't know if they were actively patrolling or not, but every once in a while you'd see them in the '38s. Of course, when we'd get into the... Like Amsterdam, when I got into Amsterdam, it was full of German soldiers because, I think, probably a lot of them come in there [on] like two or three-day leaves and so forth. But the Wehrmacht, the Occupation Forces, they were always there in great numbers.

But in Amsterdam, in Rotterdam, I guess—that's the two biggest towns I was in—we couldn't even show ourself in the daytime, for fear we didn't know who would see us and who might report us. You didn't know who was quislings or who was Dutch citizens that wouldn't give your positions or anything away.

DePue: What would have happened to you if you had been captured? They'd probably find out you were a downed American pilot, correct?

Belton: Well, they probably would, although we're only supposed to give our name, rank and serial number. That's all we're supposed to give. But I understand they had ways of getting more out of you. That's hypothetical; I don't know. If they had found out who I was, like I said prior to this, I figured I'd be in serious trouble, because I was in civilian garb.

DePue: Yeah, possibly seen as a spy perhaps?

Belton: Some kind of an agent or whatever, you know, especially after we were in Amsterdam and taking part with Hans, our commander there, and some covert actions. We were in on some secret things that I've never talked about since then. I don't know, I think maybe some of them are declassified. But I sure didn't want to get caught; that was true. I took a lot of the best measures I could, under the circumstances, to keep from getting captured.

And all the fellows I was with, they knew the situation. They were in as bad a situation as I was, because if they were captured, and they [the Germans] found out that they were part of the Dutch Underground, I heard

stories of how they treated them very cruel, trying to get information to infiltrate the underground forces.

DePue: Now, I know from reading this other interview that you did quite a few years ago, that you almost hit a German, or you did hit a German.

Belton: Oh, in Amsterdam.

DePue: That was in Amsterdam?

Belton: Yeah, that was another incident that was... Well, I considered it sort of dangerous. (laughs) We were on bicycles, and I was with the same girl that had taken me to get books over at her father's place. I can't remember where we were that day. We were on bicycles, and we were going back to our headquarters. We went around the corner on a bicycle, and there was a German officer on a bicycle, and I hit him and knocked him down.

Oh man, he got up, and right away I started giving him the *doofstom* treatment, whatever that is. And he got a hold of me, like so. I was afraid I'd be picked up maybe and taken in to wherever he reported to. He, I guess, I don't know, probably called me every name in the German alphabet, but I didn't know what it was. Finally he just gave me a big shove, and I just fell over on the ground and lay there like I was hurt. He got on his bike and took off. I got on my bike and caught my breath, and (laughs) got back with her and back to headquarters. But that was another instance where I didn't know what was going to happen.

DePue: Too many close calls for you.

Belton: After it was all said and done, God was looking out after me, somebody.

DePue: What happened that you departed from the shack that you had lived in for a while?

Belton: Well, we started travelling. We got word by courier, which was the commander of that shack; Flip's sister was a courier. She came, with a message that the Germans had found out where our headquarters were. This was in North Holland.

So, at midnight that night we moved out, lock, stock and barrel. We carried everything we could. We carried as much ammunition as we could. I think I got rid of that English Sten gun. I didn't care for it. It was a metal Sten gun, but most of us had rifles. I had a Belgian rifle. We also had a fifty caliber machine gun. I can't remember how they got a hold of that, like one of those on an airplane, you know, like on a B-17?

DePue: Well, there were probably plenty of B-17s that were going down on the ground in Holland, at the time.

Belton: Well, true. I don't know where that came from, but they're heavy. They were heavy. We tried to take that with us. Two of us carried it, one on the end of the barrel and one on the back end.

DePue: You don't do that on a bicycle.

Belton: Oh, no, no bicycles. We're all walking, when we left there at 12:00. It was cold and ice on the canals, a lot of canals over there.

DePue: Was it February, by this time?

Belton: That there? Let's see, January... Yeah, it would've been in February, yeah.

DePue: Go ahead.

Belton: It was so cold, and there was ice on the canals. We travelled the canals quite a lot, because there's ice on them. And otherwise, it's easier walking than in the snow, on the ground. We travelled at night. Our commander and most of them there knew what houses we could go to—to hide out during the day—that were sympathetic towards the Dutch Underground. And we'd go to those farmhouses.

We started working our way to the south. I don't know; it was several days. We never showed ourselves in the daytime, because of fear of people reporting us and so forth. I finally ended up with two of the guys. I think Cowboy Ted, and I don't know who the other fellow was, took me to a town called Zaandam. That's north of Amsterdam, oh I don't know, fifteen, twenty mile, whatever.

DePue: I've got a map with that as well.

Belton: Yeah, there's—

DePue: So, here's Amsterdam, and just north of there is—

Belton: Right here; is that it, Zaandam? No, here it is. It's, that "A." I don't know what that "A" is, but that's Zaandam, right there.

DePue: Yeah, you're just pointing out exactly where it is.

Belton: They took me there, and there is where I met my good friend, Toffy Hofland. Toffy was in the Dutch Underground. He was in charge of the dropping field at Spanbrook. The dropping field there was used by the RAF [Royal Air Force – the United Kingdom's aerial warfare force] to drop supplies and food and so forth to the underground in Holland.

The only trouble was, the Germans found out where the dropping field was, as well as the Dutch people, and they would be there. We had to salvage

everything we could get, in a hurry and get out, because we were outmanned and outgunned and everything else, by the Germans.

So, anyhow, I got in on one of those droppings one night. And all I ended up with was a English chocolate that had the little ridges or something on it. I remember taking that...I kept that, until I got to Amsterdam. And how was it? Oh, I gave somebody the chocolate bar, because everything we got in the Dutch Underground to eat was always divided equally, among whoever was in the group.

So that chocolate bar, they cut it up into little pieces—maybe ten or eleven of us were in the headquarters—and it got around to me. I said, “Oh,” I said, “I don’t want to take any. I’ve had chocolate a lot, not nearly as long as you folks.” That went over like a lead balloon, because you take your part; I’ll take my part. Everybody was the same way on...

I had, I think, two Old Gold cigarettes, when I went down in that shack, I didn't even think about smoking. I pulled those out, and I had this cigarette, and someone had a match. I started to light it, and I just got the feeling everybody had his eyes on me and that cigarette. I didn't even light the cigarette, and everybody got a puff. (laughs) Cigarettes were...we smoked dried tea leaves. I tried the dried tea leaves, and I thought I'd collapsed my lungs. I got off of those. I just didn't smoke while I was over there. But they smoked there, a lot of tea leaves.

Some of those old farmers, where we'd stop, had these cherry...It was an alcohol, you know, in a big jug with cherries, like a cognac or something like that, potent stuff. (laughs)

DePue: Where did they get the food, because I imagine under German-occupied Holland, everybody got rations, and that was very thin to begin with.

Belton: Very thin. Well, the farmers are the ones that lucked out, because they had milk and cheese and stuff like so. They could live pretty good. In fact, the only times we had a lot to eat is when we would go out and take it. We were at an advantage. We had a way to combat the Germans and go out to these families that maybe didn't even want to have any part of us, but we'd take the milk, cheese or whatever we could get. But that wasn't too often, really. Our food supply, while we were there, was very, very limited.

In Amsterdam, I think there was eleven of us in headquarters, in Hans' place. We had a few potatoes in a bathtub. I remember that. And we ate those up. Once we left that duck decoy, we didn't have any more duck. I don't remember... We ate sugar beets. They'd take sugar beets and boil them and get the water, the sugar. We'd take the pulp, and we'd eat some of that pulp. But it was as bad as tulip bulbs.

DePue: Did you stay at this dropping field, near Zaandam, very long?

Belton: No, I only stayed in Zaandam, I'm going to say maybe a couple, three nights or so. I went to the dropping field just once, and that was enough. That was pretty scary, because, like I said, the Germans had found out where the dropping field was. But the RAF, they'd drop all of these supplies and everything, and the Germans would get most of them.

But then Toffy Hofland, he took me... He was one of the guys. Toffy and Ted, I think it was, anyhow they took me into Amsterdam and took me... I was very fortunate, when I got into Amsterdam, they put me with Hans, this was his code name. He was a British citizen and had been trained in Britain and dropped out at night, by parachute. He was in charge of the Amsterdam area, north of the resistance forces.

I was fortunate enough to get in with him and his group in Amsterdam, which was only about... I didn't know this at the time, but we were only about a couple, three blocks from Anne Frank's family, where they lived, on the same canal, on the other side of the canal.

Hans... I've got all kinds of literature in there of this woman that's done a lot of research of this. And I've been enlightened quite a lot, as to what happened. Hans was killed about two weeks after I left to go on to South Holland. We were headed down toward Rotterdam.

DePue: Did any of these people you're associated with make a concerted effort to smuggle you out of Holland and back across friendly lines?

Belton: Well, that was the object, from the time I went down, was to get me all the way down to Diedrich. At that time—they didn't know this—but they had a motor launch that came up the Waal River and would take downed flyers out and get them back into the Allied side.

Well, I'm jumping ahead of myself on the story, but the Germans found out about the motor launch and, of course, destroyed it. We had gone there three nights in a row, waiting for that motor launch. This is later on, of course, when we got down to South Holland. But the object, like you asked, their main object was to try to get me down to South Holland, to get this motor launch to get out of there, which they didn't know the motor launch was—

DePue: And in the meantime, it sounds like they treat you just like you're another member of the underground.

Belton: Pretty much, you're pretty much on your own. Well, they were very helpful. They were very helpful. They understood that I didn't understand their language. But, after I was there quite some time, I got to where I could listen to them, and I could get a pretty good idea of what was going on. But I couldn't speak too much Dutch. By the time I left, I got where I could speak

Dutch and tell them I was hungry, or I wanted to go to bed, or how are you, things like that.

DePue: Did they take you on quite a few missions?

Belton: In Amsterdam, yeah. I went on a couple of missions or whatever you want to call them. One was to go up a—What do you call a distributing—substation that put out electricity to a German Gestapo headquarters in Amsterdam. We blew that up. That was one of our missions. I don't know where they got the dynamite to blow it up. But anyhow we blew it out. That took care of the electric in those soldiers' barracks.

Two days later, I was with the same girl down at Dom Square and witnessed my first reprisal. I didn't know what was going on. I don't think she did either. But we were down there, and here come this German detail. They went over and they just... They just picked up, I think, ten guys. They didn't know; they're just ten men, and they didn't know why they were being picked up. But they [the German detail] were trying to get back at the underground for bombing their substation. [They] lined those ten guys up against the wall, and the firing squad shot them, just shot them. That was probably one of my most difficult scenes that I witnessed while I was there.

I know we were standing side by side, and I remember flinching. She—I should remember her name; I can't think of it—I remember she laid her hand over on my arm, with a pretty strong hold. You know, not to do anything, which is very difficult, not to have some kind of a reaction. I'd never seen anything like that. I didn't realize, I guess, at the time, I didn't really... Well, I give it a lot of thought, and I knew how terrible it was. But I really didn't let it sink in, like I have since then, and how much it meant to our way of life and that sort of thing. I witnessed two of those, while I was in Amsterdam, unfortunately. I didn't look for them; it was just something that I came upon.

DePue: Do you think it caused the underground to rethink about doing some of their activities?

Belton: Not whatsoever. It didn't. Well, I'm sure they thought about it, but they didn't let any of those activities decrease their missions or anything. They were very, very... Everyone that I met in the Dutch Underground, I call them patriots. Just, they'd do anything for their country, just like... You know, we have people like that. That's why we have veterans.

DePue: Do you think that it changed the rest of the Dutch population and their attitudes towards the underground? That's what the Germans were hoping would happen.

Belton: That I don't know. All I know... Of course, after the war I got acquainted with most of their wives and their families. They were also very patriotic. But, I

don't know as I remember most of them talking about how they felt. Well, they would talk about how concerned they were about their spouse or daughter or whatever, that was in the Dutch Underground.

I remember talking to Fee one night, about Flip. He was our commander. And, by the way, I didn't tell you about this. But when I had first got in that shack, they had had some kind of a run-in with some Germans, and Flip, our commander, had been shot through the calf of his leg, through the fat part of his leg. Of course, we had no medicine or anything over there. He had a...I don't know what it was; it looked like bear grease to me. And he had a little dowel rod and a old rag on there. He'd stick that in that black salve, or whatever, and stick that in that wound. The wound went through his calf. At that time, I thought, he'll never save that leg. He did. That leg, over the years, healed. But boy up there, I'd see him stick that in there, and that white infection and stuff. We didn't even have any—

DePue: Sulfur?

Belton: No, what did they call that stuff we'd sprinkle on the wounds? We didn't have it, but—

DePue: I'm thinking either sulfa drugs or penicillin.

Belton: Sulfa, something. I guess it was, yeah, sulfa, powdered.

DePue: Tell me more about the place that you were living, once you got to Amsterdam?

Belton: In Amsterdam? We were living in... Well, I would call it an apartment. I don't know what they called it in those days, but it was on the second floor. I don't know if you're familiar with how Amsterdam is. It's full of canals. And on all the canals is all these houses. They're just side by side by side. There's no distance in between. And, of course, there's different floors, up and down. We had no elevators, of course, but we were on the second floor of this apartment. That's where we operated out of. I don't know if you get tired of these stories or not, but—

DePue: Absolutely not.

Belton: I could tell you another very interesting story. A few days after I'd been there...I'd always sit at the front window when I had some time, and I'd peek through the curtains. They had horse and wagons, back in those days, the Germans. People were dying in Amsterdam, from mostly starvation, dysentery, uremic poisoning and that sort of thing, due to the water and all that, no electric. Anyhow, they'd pull those wagons by, and every once, a coffin or...not a box; I guess you'd call it a box. A dead person would roll out, and they'd throw him back in there, and on down the road they'd go.

But anyhow, we're in this apartment one day, and I'm looking out the glass, and here comes this '38 Ford, with a charcoal burner on the back end. It pulled up, and the door opens, and out comes this... He looked to me like he was ten feet tall. I know he wasn't, but he was an SS [Schutzstaffel, German for "Protective Echelon"] captain, Gestapo. And I didn't think... Well, I wondered what they're doing in front of our place, but I didn't dream what was going to happen.

He got out, and he got this woman out of the other side of the car, who was on crutches. And they disappeared underneath where I was looking. The next thing I know, there's a knock at the door. I went over to the door. I was the first to the door; I cracked the curtain or the shade or whatever. And here stood that guy and this woman. I panicked. I went high-tailing in to Hans, and tell him. Well, they knew what was happening. I didn't know that.

He goes over, opens the door. I'm face to face with a captain in the Gestapo, in Nazi uniform and everything. Then Hans tells me what the deal was. He was a double agent. Believe it or not, he and his family lived in Gestapo headquarters in Amsterdam. I often wondered if he made it through the war, or if they didn't find out who he was.

But anyhow, they come on in, and this woman had parachuted... She had been trained in England. That's where they trained most of these underground people and drop them out at night. She had bailed out, parachute, broke her leg when she landed. The Germans found her and picked her up, didn't know who she was. [They] put her in the hospital, and after she got her leg all set and all that, she had it in a cast.

I don't know how they found this out. I didn't know the details or anything, but this Gestapo officer goes over. He had the authority to take her out of the hospital, brought her over to our apartment, and the next day, they [the underground] took her up north. That was quite an experience. That's the closest I ever got to a so-called Gestapo captain. (laughs)

DePue: You mentioned that, where you were staying, you didn't know at the time, obviously, but it was only a couple blocks away from where Anne Frank's family was staying, as well. My guess is it would have been about this time that they would have discovered that family and hauled them off to the death camps.

Belton: I read Corrie ten Boom.⁸ I can't remember the date, though. That would have been, let's see... That would have been in maybe the last of February and March of '45.

⁸ Cornelia "Corrie" ten Boom, a Dutch Christian who, along with her father and other family members, helped many Jews escape the Nazi Holocaust during World War II and was imprisoned for it. Her most famous book, *The Hiding Place*, describes the ordeal. ⁹https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Corrie_ten_Boom)

DePue: You mentioned also, in this previous interview, that the Germans would occasionally round up able-bodied people to work for them?

Belton: Yeah, they called that razzia, I think. I went through two or three of those, with a Scottish gunner. His bow fighter, not a bullfighter, a bow fighter, was a RAF plane, open cockpit, two seats. He was a gunner on a bow fighter. They had been shot down; his pilot was killed. And I met him in Amsterdam, a Scotsman.

DePue: What was his name?

Belton: I knew you were going to ask me that.

DePue: Henry Radcliff?

Belton: Henry Radcliff. How'd you know that?

DePue: Well, I read your other—

Belton: Okay, I'm trying to remember all this. Henry Radcliff, oh, man, I'll tell you. He spoke English, Scottish English, and I spoke English. And we had a hell of a time understanding each other. I was always saying, "What did you say? What did you say?" And we'd get in a big argument over who spoke the best English. I finally said, "Well, Henry, how come I have to keep asking you, all the time, what you're talking about, and you never seem to be bothered with my English?" But anyhow, you know, the church is a "kirk," and anyhow we've become pretty close friends. We went through some of these manhunts that you were talking about, two different towns on the way down south. He was with me going down south.

DePue: Were they looking for underground people, or were they looking for people to work?

Belton: They were looking for all the young people they could get their hands on. They'd take them to Germany to work in their factories and slave camps and that sort of thing. Each one of these houses, in the Dutch Underground, most of them where we stopped were part of the Dutch Underground. They'd have a secret hiding place, in a wall, for their husband or son or whatever or maybe two. That's where they would put us. We got caught in a couple of those.

What the Germans done in the smaller towns, they'd come in with, I don't know how many soldiers, and they'd ring the city, and they'd put their soldiers about 400 or 500 feet apart and just ring, so nobody could get through. Then they'd have a detail come through the houses, looking for men. And (laughs) we'd sit in there behind those little, old thin walls, like so. They'd usually put Henry and I in the same space. That was something else.

We'd be in there, and our knees would be in each other's crotch, and our foreheads about that far apart. And, of course, sweat (laughs).

The soldiers would come in; they couldn't find anybody. They couldn't find any men or young men. Once in a while, they'd spray. We were in a couple of them where they just, they'd spray walls in different rooms with their rifles. Of course, you'd sit there and pray and hope that you don't get hit. Henry and I went through two of those, and that was quite an ordeal.

I often wondered, when I finally got back to the States, I know I was...I don't know what you want to call it, as far the wife was concerned, but for a long time I was quite disturbed, like during the night and everything. And I know I put her [Virginia] through hell.

DePue: Just because—

Belton: Well, just—

DePue: We call that post-traumatic stress disorder.

Belton: Is that what... Well now, but back in... We didn't even know what friendly fire was, back in those days.

DePue: I think they might have called it “shell shock” in World War II?

Belton: In World War I, they called it shell shock. I had an uncle that had shell shock.

DePue: Combat fatigue. I think that was the term that a lot of the military veterans, the guys in the infantry and the Marines, they were often categorized as having combat fatigue.

Belton: Well, I don't know what you call it, but like at night you'd hear something, a noise or something, and up you'd come and ready to go. That wasn't too easy on the wife, I know. But she was a Good Samaritan; I'll tell you that.

DePue: Can you remember any of the other missions you went on? You mentioned that they were probably classified, but I can't imagine that this many years—

Belton: Oh, you mean in Amsterdam?

DePue: Yeah.

Belton: Well, there were a couple that I've never ever talked about, and I don't know if I'm supposed to. I'd just as soon skip over those two. There was the one to the sub, what you call it?

DePue: Sub pens?

Belton: No, the electric distribution place, you know, the sub—

DePue: Substation.

Belton: And, let's see. I'm trying to think. We had another one. What the heck was it? We raided something one night. I can't remember what it was. There were so many things going on. I can't remember what it was, but there were a couple of missions that...I'd just as soon not get into those.

DePue: When you were in Amsterdam, were you spending the vast majority of your time in this apartment?

Belton: Yes, that was the headquarters of the Amsterdam area.

DePue: Did you dare venture out at all, onto the streets?

Belton: Oh, yes, yes. Amsterdam was the only...Amsterdam and Rotterdam. I wasn't in Rotterdam, except for like overnight, when we had to ditch and go in the river and so forth. But Amsterdam...What were we talking about?

DePue: Well, just going out into the streets.

Belton: Oh, yeah, we could go out. That was the one place where there's a lot of people, and we'd go on bicycle rides. I could get out and mingle in the crowd, where you couldn't do that in any of the smaller towns, at all.

DePue: Were you doing that just to get out of the apartment or because you had a specific mission that you had to accomplish?

Belton: Well, I went with this one young girl. She took me out several times. I didn't know my way around Amsterdam before. She took me several times over to her parents' house and was with me when I had two or three of these other incidents that I mentioned. I spent more time, actually, in the apartment.

Belton: Well, I went with this one young girl. She took me out several times. I didn't know my way around Amsterdam, of course. She took me several times over to her parents' house and was with me when I had two or three of these other incidents I mentioned. I spent more time, actually, in the apartment.

I didn't go out just to sightsee in the village. I didn't want to expose myself any more than what I had to, because of the fear of getting captured or getting caught, as one of the Dutch Underground or whatever. I didn't do any sightseeing, but I was able to get out, because of all the...The place was full of German occupation soldiers, when I was there.

It wasn't a very nice environment. Like I'd said, starvation was...People in the streets, you could just see their ribs. They were starving and diseased. The Germans raped that city. They took almost everything you could think of in Amsterdam. They took trolley wires and everything they could possibly take out of there.

DePue: Where were the underground people getting their food, at this time, the same as before?

Belton: A lot of times we'd go out in the country and get food from people that you knew were friendly, part of the... Well, they weren't really part; they didn't take an active part in fighting the Germans, but they were patriots. They weren't quislings, and they'd give you cheese, meat, butter and so forth. But we didn't get too much of that. Like I said, we had to be steady.

I'll have to tell you about the tulip bulbs. I got in there, and I met Henry. Henry got into Amsterdam about the same time I did. I don't know how he got there, but—

DePue: This would be a Dutchman?

Belton: The Scottish gunner—

DePue: Oh, Henry Radcliff.

Belton: Henry Radcliff. And we met. Oh, we met two or three times in Amsterdam. I'd say, "Well, what have you had to eat, Henry?" "Oh, damned tulip bulbs." He says, "I'll never eat another one of those, as long as I live." In a few days I'd see him again. And I'd say, "What have you been eating, Henry?" "Tulip bulbs." (both laugh) He didn't have any choice. We ate quite a few tulip bulbs.

We had potatoes. I don't know where they got the potatoes. I remember we had a half a bushel of potatoes or so in a bathtub in our headquarters in Amsterdam. But even there, where you would think we'd have the most food, we didn't have a whole lot of food.

DePue: I want to ask you about the decoy Zwaagdijk mission. Does that ring a bell to you? Zwaagdijk, I think, is a location. I don't know if that was a specific mission or just that you were there for a short time.

Belton: (consulting the map) It would have been over here. Well, that was in the chicken house or decoy. That's where we stayed in the... I don't have any other—

DePue: So there's no specific mission that you recall from that?

Belton: No. Well, I told you about the one to the hospital to get Steve and the bazooka incident.

DePue: Then what happens after you're in Amsterdam for a while?

Belton: Well, I don't know. I was in Amsterdam, I don't know, sometime. And two of the guys were going to take me on south. We left Amsterdam and we...

Somewhere between Amsterdam and Rotterdam, and I don't recall, we were crossing this river.

It was on a bridge, and they had sentry houses on both ends of the bridge. The bridge was just maybe like this to the water, about two feet off the water, a low bridge. And they had sentry houses on both ends. We were crossing this bridge. I don't know whether the underground guys thought that the people on both ends were going to capture us, and here come two guys, armed, and the other two guys, they were coming. And here we were, caught in the middle of the bridge.

DePue: When you say "two guys," are you talking about German soldiers?

Belton: German soldiers, both ends. They were out of this house. They had those little—

DePue: Sounds like a guard house.

Belton: Guard house, yeah, that's what I'm trying to say. Anyhow, the guys in the underground, and I think—I don't know if Trenk was one of those guys— Anyhow, they [the underground] thought that they were after us. And they may have been. We were on bicycles, and you know what? He says, "Let's hit the river." So, off we go. We drove our bicycles off in the river. Man, you talk about cold. There's ice in that river. And the river was fairly swift, thank God. I remember grabbing a chunk of ice and trying to hold my breath and get under, in case they were firing at us.

I don't know; we went down that river half a mile. I don't know. We got out and got into an old warehouse. This was in the suburbs of Rotterdam. (to himself) How did we get our clothes dried? We took some of our clothes off, and we got a fire in a warehouse, as I recall. I can't remember where we got the fire. Anyhow, we stayed in there and got our clothes dry, before we headed on south. That was about as scary, as far as trying to save myself. I could swim and all that, but that was a harrowing experience.

DePue: Do you know if the Germans saw you when you took that dive off there?

Belton: Well, they had to see us. We came off in the middle of the bridge. I don't know to this day if they were trying to capture us or not. Maybe, I don't remember; I don't remember talking to the guys to see if they thought...I'm sure they thought this. That's why we went over the side of the bridge.

DePue: Do you know if they actually were firing on you?

Belton: I don't recall any firing. No, I don't. But anyhow, I recall that cold water, and the clothes were icy cold and trying to get them dry, after we got in this old warehouse. I can't remember how we got some heat; I can't remember. I don't remember if the warehouse was abandoned or what. But anyhow, we spent

some time there, drying our clothes, and then we headed on south and worked our way all the way down to Dietrich.

This was a small town. We couldn't show ourselves in the daytime. So they decided to go over and meet this motor launch on the river, to get me out of there. So there was...Let's see, two Dutch women, three Tommies [British Allied troops], three, four, five, myself and the guide. That's what? Seven, as I recall, three, four, five, seven of us, counting the guide. We had a guide.

We had to leave this little town, and we had to travel through the canals. They had some locks on the smaller canals. Of course, we were in a row boat, and we had to operate those locks, just like a bigger ship would. But the one lock that we had to go through was friendly to the Dutch Underground. So, we had no problem there.

We get over there. We went over there the first night, and we set there to meet this launch. The code name was *Columbus*, as I recall. We sat there, and nothing happened, nothing happened. So, it was getting towards morning. We had to get back before daylight, so no one would see us. We went back to where we were hiding out in this underground house. And we went the second night. We went three nights.

The third night we went...We didn't know this, but the launch had been discovered by the Germans and didn't exist anymore. So, the third night we were sitting over there, and it was misty and rainy and a miserable night. I remember setting there, and when you had to relieve yourself, all your modesty is gone, even with the women. You had to do what you had to do. It just wasn't my way of life or probably any of the others, either.

But anyhow, the third night over there, we set there. We had these three Tommies, English soldiers, and the two Dutch women, who were trying to get back to England, and myself and the guide. He says, "I think I could maybe get you over to the Allied side." He said, "Would any of you be interested in maybe trying that?" He said, "We don't know what's going on. We can't get out any other way." So, we took a vote. And we voted unanimously to go ahead and come through there or try to get through. So, we put ourselves in his hands.

We had arms in the boat. We had some guns and so forth, but nothing to match anybody if we were caught. We started out that night. And thank God it was misty and rainy, and you couldn't see. We crossed that first river we were on. I'm thinking it was the Waal, but I'm not...Anyhow, it was pretty swift. There was a ditch on the far side that the guide was trying to hit, to get over to some more water. But the current had carried us a lot farther downstream than he figured. We had to row back up that river, I remember, quite a ways on the far side, to find a canal to go over to another waterway. Well, we got that done.

Then we got over on the... Maybe it was the Waal we got on. But anyhow, they had these... Oh, what did they call them? Cable crossings, built on little towers on each side of the river. And the Germans had taken over all of those and set up nests of machine guns to patrol anything, up and down the waterway.

DePue: Did they have spotlights to—

Belton: Well, yeah, we found this out. Well, I think the guy knew. He told us; he said, "Now, when we get over in the wall," or wherever it was, he said, "You just be perfectly still, no rowing the boat, no anything. We'll just let the current take us down the river because," he said, "the Germans have posts on all those cable crossings, and they're there to prevent what's happening."

So then, we get over there, and we start down. The first crossing we come to, he told us, and he were all very still, not making any noise. I don't know how the Germans knew, or even if they did know we were there. But all of the sudden, the sky just... And the fog lit up, like a big white glare and rainy, thank goodness. They started spraying the water with machine guns.

Here we're sitting in this little, old... Well, it was like a big Jon boat. [a flat-bottomed boat, constructed of aluminum, fiberglass or wood, with one to three bench seats] There's seven of us in there. But you set there. There again, like in the house, where they had the manhunts, we sat there and hoped that nobody got hit in the boat. We went through two of those that night. That was a hairy thing.

To make a long story short, we were in the boat all night. It was getting about, I don't know, early in the morning. It was still dark, and the guide was quite concerned as to just where we were. All water, everywhere you went was water. He says, "I think we're on the Allied side." He didn't know that we were down in the area of Antwerp. So, he says, "Well, let's go in and take our chances." So we decided we would. And he says, "Don't anybody use any arms, because we're helpless, here in this boat."

We finally go in to shore. It was dark, and we could see soldiers, silhouettes of soldiers, with arms and everything. And this guide, he thought well, he would try our password. So he hollered, "Columbus," but it didn't mean anything. So pretty soon, here come two or three of those guys with rifles, right down to our boat. They had us under their rifles.

So the guard, he could speak... What did those guys speak? French. He could speak a little French, and he tried to tell them what we were and so forth. They were quite apprehensive about it. So, they took him and took him up a ways, off the shore of the boat there, and pretty soon... He was gone for about an hour. I guess he convinced them who we were. We were in an English outfit and then got intelligence—

DePue: Communications or—

Belton: No. Anyhow, most of them spoke French. And anyhow, he convinced them who we were. They come down to the boat. Of course, they had us all under arms and got us out of the boat, took us into a little shack that wasn't much bigger than this kitchen. It had a little table and chairs. We set around there, and they brought in some cheese and two gallon of rum and Navy Players, that was an English cigarette, and dumped a bunch of those on the table. Man, we all grabbed for those cigarettes.

I left that place that morning. My hands were brown; I smoked so many cigarettes. But anyhow, the three Tommies...I don't know how long they'd been there. I don't know what happened to them after they left, but we just put them in the boat, to get through. They poured a big glass full of rum and then immediately vomited it up, all over the table. I knew better than to do that. And then the cheese... We hit the cheese pretty heartedly.

We spent the night there. That's where the three Tommies...I don't know where they went. I don't know what happened to the women. But, I ended up with this outfit, and they took me to one of the field houses. There I started sweating those damn *putt-putt* machines. We called them washing machines, the V-1s⁹—

DePue: The V-1s, yeah.

Belton: They were a harassing; they weren't going to win a war, but they were demoralizing. You'd hear them, *putt-putt-putt*, and when the *putt-putt* stopped, you found a hole or whatever, because that meant here come a load of dynamite, down. I sweat out some of those in the field there. In fact, one of those things hit a church, about two blocks from where I was quartered with this French outfit. And—

DePue: These were French soldiers?

Belton: Yeah. Well no, they were French Canadians, French Canadians. What was their outfit? I keep wanting to say intelligence, but that's...Anyhow, where was I in this story?

DePue: Well, the V-1s were coming, raining down.

Belton: Oh, I was just in a house, a regular house, that the military had taken over. It wasn't too far from the war zone. We were sweating out those V-1s. One of them hit a church and, man oh man, blew the windows out of the house that we were in. They were just loaded with dynamite. I spent about three or four

⁹ Difficult to classify as a weapon the V-1 was not a true rocket, in that it did not leave the atmosphere, but it was also clearly not a plane. Perhaps it could best be described as a winged but pilot-less, fuel propelled flying bomb.

days there, with this outfit and a little major. I don't recall his name. He came in the jeep, and they gave me some kind of orders. I don't recall. Anyhow, he took me to Brussels. This was getting real close to the end of the war.

Anyhow, he took me to Brussels, and I had quite an experience in the Brussels Airport. The RAF was the only planes that flew out of there, and most of them were...they weren't the best airplanes. They carried passengers, of course. I got in the airport. And I had a priority from these folks that I was with there, to get on a plane to go to Paris, which was the headquarters for the Air Force, U.S. Air Force.

I sat there, and I'm still in this garb that I was in, in the Dutch Underground, an old overcoat. I had achieved a...I don't know where I got it, a beret, an English beret, and that's all I had. Then I had on an old overcoat, shoes and so forth. Every time a plane would leave, I'd go up there and here would come a bunch of English officers and I don't know if it was their wives or girlfriends or what. But I got shoved back all the time and couldn't get on it. I sat there for almost a morning.

And then came a general, General Williamson. I got to know his name. He was flying to his...He had brought him in in a staff car. I don't know how he got there or whatever. But anyhow, he checked in at the desk, and he came over and just happened to sit down beside me. When he sat down, I said, "Good morning, Sir." He says, "Are you an American?" And I says, "I'm just about as American as you can get." He says, "Well, what's going on?" (laughs) I was in civilian clothes. I give him the sketch of where I'd been and what had happened and why I was there, and I was trying to get to Paris. And he says, "You'll be on the next airplane, with me."

I don't know whatever happened to him, but he was an A-number one guy. He got me on that airplane. He had a white knuckle flight, all the way to Paris. I don't think he had flown too much. But anyhow, we went on a small RAF plane and got to Paris. We got there, and he said, "My staff sergeant's going to meet me with a car." He says, "Where do you have to go?"

I says, "Something Rue Lafayette." I had a hotel and so forth and told him. He says, "We'll just take you by there." I said, "Oh, that would be great." So, here I am in this staff car with a one-star general and a driver. We pull up to this hotel, and a bunch of Air Force guys, like myself, were in there. Here come this car, with the star on it. And man, those guys were like...They weren't expecting anything like that. And what happens? They open the door, and I step out. I never heard the end of that damn story the whole time I was in that hotel. (both laugh) It scared the living crap out of them, a general coming to that hotel. But anyhow, I had a nice room there and, oh, a nice bed. And I got toothpaste; my teeth were about that color.

DePue: A nice black color, it sounds like?

Belton: Yeah, I brushed and brushed and had a nice bed and a nice room and one of those... What do you call them, the women use? Bidet. I didn't even know what the hell it was. We never had anything [like that] over here, see.

Anyhow, a few days after I was there, I caught an awful cold and almost... I thought I was going to die. And here, if I'd have had anything like that in Holland, I probably wouldn't be here today, because there was no way to... doctors or anything. Here, I got the whatever it was there, in a nice room in Paris. (laughs)

DePue: I want to take you back. I have a couple of questions, in this long process of finally getting to freedom, if you will. You got across the river, and you made landing, apparently, and thought you were pretty close to friendly lines. But then this group finds you, and they take your guide away for an hour. What was going through your mind when you were sitting there, waiting for the guide and somebody else to come back?

Belton: [I was] hoping it's not Germans. We didn't know for sure. The guide told us. He said, "I'm not for sure that I've got you where I think I have." And, like I said, it was all water. I didn't know where I was at. I had no idea. But in that boat, and I'm sure the rest of them, I thought, oh God, let's hope it's Allied people, because after going through all of this, I don't want to get captured.

DePue: At what point in the whole process did you know for sure, we're free; we're out of there?

Belton: Well, when they finally come down and after the guide... They took the guide up there, and he convinced them who we were. Then they come down and took us into this little shack. One of their officers came in, and then we knew that we were on the Allied side. That wasn't too far from Antwerp, Belgium, as I recall.

DePue: Were you able to let your guard down and really relax at that point?

Belton: Yeah, yeah, to a certain degree. I didn't feel like I was out of the woods yet, because I was still with strange people and strange outfits and feeling my way around. But I was relieved of all the anxiety I had in the Dutch Underground, that every moment you didn't know what was going to happen.

DePue: Did you feel like celebrating? Did you get really emotional, or were you just kind of numb at that point?

Belton: Well, no, I didn't think anything. The one thing that was in my mind, I've got to let Virginia know I'm safe. I couldn't do that until I got into Paris. And I sent one telegram, right after another, "I'm okay. Don't worry" and so forth and so on.

DePue: Was she able to get a telegram to you?

Belton: No, no, I never got anything from her.

DePue: I'll jump ahead a little bit. What had she been thinking had happened to you? When you finally did get together, what was she telling you?

Belton: What was she telling? I didn't have any contact with her.

DePue: No, after you got back to the United States, what was she thinking while she was waiting?

Belton: Oh, I had a lifelong friend who was in the Quartermaster Corps in England. He and his friend, who I knew very well, they had access to a jeep. He had a real good deal. He was always in the Quartermaster Corps, didn't see any combat while he was there. But he knew I was at this particular air force base. They came up. After I went down, they came up there one day in the jeep, looking for me. All they would tell them, at the base, was that he was on a mission, and he hadn't come back yet. They wouldn't give him any details. They didn't know too many details.

So, Zerk, that was his nickname, Gerald Jones, he wrote Virginia. Of course, we all knew each other before the war. Gerald and I went to high school together. And Virginia went one year at Tallula, where I was going. Anyhow, he wrote Virginia and told her his experience up there, that they wouldn't tell him what happened, but I wasn't there anymore. That's about the only news she got, from the time I went down until I could tell her I was okay, which was what? Three or four months.

DePue: Well, so many of the people who went down with you, under those kinds of circumstances, never came back.

Belton: Well, I don't know how long it took the War Department to get any messages—as far as the guys that were killed—back to their relatives or family.

DePue: You would have been declared missing in action, correct?

Belton: Right. Well, all of us were missing in action.

DePue: And a lot of those people, who were missing in action, ended up having died.

Belton: Right.

DePue: Was there anybody in your family who thought that was what had happened to you?

Belton: Oh, I'm sure they thought... Now, Ginny, she says she was quite concerned that... Well, the reason that those thoughts went through her mind... Like I told you, the day before, her brother was killed, the same day I was shot down.

And, of course, with that on their mind, they, I guess, probably, maybe, thought of it on the dark side, that something had happened to me, too.

DePue: Yeah, I'm thinking she had to be devastated during that time.

Belton: But she was a trooper, I'll say that, the best woman I knew.

DePue: Let's get you back to England. How long were you in Paris?

Belton: Oh, in Paris, let's see, I was there probably a couple weeks, I guess. Well, I had a lot of interrogation. Every day I went to interrogation. What did you see? And where have you been? And what did you do? And all of that stuff, by intelligence people in Paris.

DePue: Did you understand why you were going through that, at the time?

Belton: Oh, yeah, I understood. They wanted to know where I'd been, and I told them everything I knew. But I don't know as that helped them a whole lot. But I went through several interrogations.

DePue: When would this have been? Are we talking April, by now?

Belton: Just as the war was... Yeah, it would have been in April.

DePue: The war ended on May eighth.

Belton: Because I got back... May the ninth, the war was over, VE Day in Europe. I had only been back in the United States, not very long. I don't remember the dates. I'm kind of fuzzy on the dates, maybe a week or two, two weeks ahead of that or whatever, before I actually got into Chicago to see my wife and so forth.

DePue: But I understand, from Paris you went back to England?

Belton: From Paris, I got orders to go back to my base in England, Deopham Green. I flew into London. And that night in London... By then I got clothing; I got some English boots, and I had a beret, and I got an American uniform, basic stuff.

DePue: Did you look like a lieutenant in the United States Air Force, at the time?

Belton: I don't know as I even had any rank on. That was immaterial. I could have cared less, (both laugh) no matter what I was. But anyhow, I went into this big officers' club, in London, when I got in there. And lo and behold I met Ole—His name was Olson, Vernon Olson—who was another pilot, who went to cadet training with me in the States.

He and his wife were very close friends of Virginia and I. They were Mormon. We just envied those couple, because they'd go out with us on Saturday night and drink orange pop until they were orange in the face, and the rest of us were having high balls. He had to go preach every now and then. [As] a Mormon, they had to do certain things and so forth, as part of their church. They were the nicest kids. I could tell you stories about that, but that's neither here nor there. But we had a lot of good times with them.

Anyhow, I met Vernon in this officers' club. He had lost one or two engines, on a mission over...I think it was to Berlin, if I'm not mistaken. We just talked for a few minutes. He had got back, but they crashed in England, and he had lost, I think, two crew members. But he was fine, and the rest of his crew was okay. We were going to eat or something, and he had something. I said, "Well, let's meet here in an hour," or whatever it was; I don't recall. I never seen him again, until the United States. We went to California and visited him out there. I can't recall what happened. I never got to see him, over in Europe any more.

DePue: So, this reunion with him was years and years after you got back to the States?

Belton: Well, we were together during cadet training, all the time. But, yeah, after the war, our next reunion was in California. Virginia and I went out there and visited him and...Well, that's another story. They were divorced. Don't ask me why, how, or—

DePue: But this sounds like it was long after the war?

Belton: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah, long after. It was in San Francisco. In fact, they were on friendly terms. They had children. Vern picked us up at the motel, where we were, not far from Fisherman's Wharf, and went over into Oakland. And Mickey was a real estate agent, doing quite well. They had a beautiful place. They were on friendly terms. We had dinner there that night.

But, you know, when that happens, things, there're not the same. Before, we shared an apartment, and it was just a small apartment. On weekends, when we were both off, we'd take turns renting a motel room, so the other couple could have the apartment. We were very close, very close.

DePue: Would that be the couple that's in your wedding picture together?

Belton: No, no, no. I never seen... Well, Wayne was the... I talked to him. He was in Champaign, Wayne Bell, the [best] man. And Doreen Camel(?), she was a local girl in Denver. I've never seen or heard from her since our wedding. But she was very nice, a very nice girl.

DePue: Doreen Campbell?

Belton: Doreen Camel.

DePue: Let's get you back to just getting to England. I'm wondering how much weight you lost, while you were in—



Belton: Ooh, as I recall,

Tuck and Virginia Belton's wedding portrait with best man Wayne Bell and bride's maid Doreen Campbell. The two were married in Denver in July, 1943.

when I went overseas, I was over 200 pounds. I'd always been, ever since a junior in high school, but when I got back home, I was down to about 157. So, I lost a few. But in the meantime, after I got home, and the guys started coming home, and we were all getting together every night, having a beer and telling about all of our experiences, why— (laughs)

DePue: Put on some weight again?

Belton: I got back up around 200 and something. It wasn't too awful long, but—

DePue: Well, I imagine Virginia was trying to make sure you put on a few more pounds

Belton: Well, I don't know why.

DePue: Did you go back to Deopham Green, itself?

Belton: Oh, yeah, yeah. I've been back there twice.

DePue: No, no, when you first were coming back out.

Belton: Oh, yes, I went back to the base. I went back... To finish the story we were on, when I flew from Paris, back to London, and then had that encounter with Ole and didn't see him again. Then I took a train to the base, to Attleborough, that

was where the train stopped, and went back to my base. We were housed in Nissen huts,¹⁰ about 20 of us, I guess. I went back, and I went to our headquarters. I didn't see anybody I even knew. I thought maybe I could get some of my personal stuff.

Well, in the meantime, the personal effects officer came to our hut, after the guys went down like myself, and they took all your stuff and put it in, like a foot locker, a wooden foot locker, green. [It] had your name, rank and serial number on it. They'd sent it to Liverpool. So, I got that information at the base. So, I got on the train, and I went to Liverpool. I went in this huge warehouse, on the seaport there. The sergeant, he finally found my box. It had my name on it, way up. [There were] thousands of boxes in there, green boxes.

[He] got it down. It had my name and everything on it. I opened it up, and I had a good beaver short coat. I was so proud of that. It had grease all over it or something, and a couple of old shirts. But I thought, after that encounter and getting nothing out of that box, we had a rule in our barracks that, when someone went down, and we knew they went down, you were welcome to take whatever you could use, cigarettes, candy, booze, clothes, socks, whatever, before the personal effects officer got there, because we always figured they took the cigarettes and everything and used it themselves. So that's why, in those days, things were gone.

DePue: When you went to that huge warehouse in Liverpool, that sounds like that had to be a pretty sobering experience, to see all those boxes.

Belton: Oh, man, I'll tell you. I guess I can say I was quite surprised. I never seen so many green boxes. I don't know how many. I'm sure they weren't just people from the Air Force, but probably casualties from all over, I suppose. I don't know. And they were stacked up, higher than this ceiling.

DePue: But you, better than almost anybody, understood what that represented.

Belton: Oh, absolutely, absolutely. It was quite sobering, quite sobering.

DePue: Do you remember your serial number?

Belton: Zero-seven-seven-eight-three-seven-nine. Sixteen-eighteen-forty-seven-eighty-three. I had two, one as an enlisted man and one as an officer.

DePue: You rattled those right off!

Belton: Yeah. That's one thing you had to know, name, rank and serial number.

¹⁰ A prefabricated steel structure, made from a half-cylindrical skin of corrugated steel, originally designed during the First World War by the engineer and inventor Major Peter Norman Nissen. It was used extensively during the Second World War. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nissen_hut)

DePue: How did you get from England back to the United States?

Belton: Well, that's kind of a different story, too. What's the name of that town, where we left from?

DePue: Well, in the other interview, you said it was Stone, England.

Belton: Stone, Stone, England. I went back to Stone, and that's where I was supposed... I had an A-number one priority to fly back to the States. Well, by the time I got to Stone, here come all these guys that were injured and a leg missing and all kinds of injuries. And my priority to fly was pushed aside for those guys, which I had no qualms about that whatsoever.

DePue: I'm going to interject here just briefly, because I'm curious. Was there ever any thought that you'd go back on an active status, with your old unit?

Belton: Not in Europe. They told me that at briefings in Paris, that no matter what happens, you'll never go back to this theater of war, because of where I was at and some of the things I had done and so forth.

DePue: Yeah, they didn't want to take any risks then.

Belton: Right. So, that part was out. But I went to Stone. And this lifelong friend of mine, he found out I got back, through... I don't know just how, now. They came and picked me up one night in Stone in their jeep. They had a dozen eggs and a bottle of Black & White Scotch. I hadn't seen an egg for... They picked me up and took me into Hanley, a little town called Hanley.

We went to the USO there, and the gal fried me... I ate a dozen eggs, and I don't know how much of that Scotch I drank. We put one on that night. I'll tell you, we really hung one on, (laughs) with my best friend, lifelong friend, Harvey and Gerald. Then I went back to Stone, and I never did get on a plane to fly back, which I was supposed to. I ended up on a British freighter. I can't remember the name of it, slow. We had escorts on the way back, U.S. destroyers.

DePue: So you were in a convoy going back?

Belton: In a convoy coming back. It took us twelve days to get to the States. The sea was just like a mirror. I didn't get into the story going over there, but we hit a horrible storm, and we had to lash our B4 bags down, just to keep them... Like a bowling ball, they'd roll around.

DePue: I think we did talk about that in the first interview.

Belton: Well anyhow, I was on this British freighter, and everybody on this freighter was escapees, evadees, injured and so forth. We could get anything. I had my own stateroom. None of the guys would believe this, when I got back. I had

my own stateroom, and we'd sit at a table, just like down here, with a tablecloth on it, at night. We had a guy that took care of me, a steward or whatever you call him. No matter what you wanted, a Coca Cola, a bottle of booze, whatever, it was at your command. We had a menu we ordered off of at night.

I brought the menu home with me, because I wanted to show it to some of the guys, because I knew they'd never believe me, if I told them that. (laughs) But we were treated just A-number one, all the way. I thought we'd never get there, though. Those twelve days seemed like a year and a half. I remember sailing by the Statue of Liberty (long pause), (emotionally) Quite a feeling. Yeah, it's like they say, I thought it's live and die. I thought, well, I'm proud to be who I am.

DePue: Seeing that, it sounds like it meant the world to you.

Belton: Outside of my wife, it was probably the greatest thing I'd seen.

DePue: How soon was it before you were able to get back with Virginia? Can you tell us about that?

Belton: Excuse the...I still get a little emotional. Oh I guess, let's see, we went into New York Harbor, and they sent us over to Fort Dix, New Jersey. We were there a day or two. They de-loused us and shot us and all that sort of thing, to make sure we didn't have any lice or whatever. Then I got on a train and went to Fort Sheridan, up by Chicago. I was there three or four...Of course, she knew I was back then. I was keeping in constant touch with her. After Fort Sheridan, then...I don't know, [I was] there a few days.

Then I got a two-week leave or something and got on a train and went into Chicago. I had a very, very happy and joyful reunion with, not only my wife, but her sister and her cousin and her mother. Her sister and her mother were "Rosie the Riveters,"¹¹ worked in the Douglas Airplane Factory in Chicago. Ginny worked at Marshall Fields at the time, when I was gone. We had quite a reunion at the apartment there that night and a celebration or whatever you want to call it. We just...I don't know, we just couldn't get enough of each other.

DePue: Did she have a chance to go up and see you, when you were up at Fort Sheridan?

Belton: No. We stayed in Chicago there, and then we caught a train and came home and got home. Her hometown was Atterberry, Illinois. Her name was Virginia Atterberry, from Atterberry. The town she was from, her great-grandfather had donated the land, and they named it Atterberry. Anyhow, we got home

¹¹ A cultural icon of the United States, representing the American women who worked in factories and shipyards during World War II. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rosie_the_Riveter)

and I just...I remember I was just so ecstatic that it was just like a miracle, to think where I'd been and what had happened and everything. I thought, oh my God, how lucky I am.

DePue: How long after you were back did the news about the end of the war in Europe, V-E Day, occur?

Belton: Oh, right away. I don't think I was back...I'm going to say two weeks, maybe, or three, something like that.

DePue: That sounds about right from the time you told us. Your emotions when you heard that news?

Belton: Oh, I was on cloud nine. Yeah, I thought, well, at least the damn thing is over. And I thought I would be... Well that picture, I wrote a little note on there about the four guys having a beer or whatever. That was in Miami. They sent me down there when I got home for a rest and return, they called it. And I was thinking, when I came back, I would be trained in a B-29, which was an overgrown B-17 and probably go to the Pacific. Well, in the meantime, they dropped the bomb in Japan. Of course, you could see the light then. I didn't have to go any farther.



Lieutenant Belton (2nd from the right) relaxes with some army buddies in Miami Beach in May, 1945 following his escape from occupied Europe and return to the United States.

DePue: Well, there's been a lot of controversy, ever since that, about whether or not that was the right thing to do.

Belton: It was absolutely the right thing, in my mind. I'm sure Harry Truman went to his grave thinking, did I do the right thing? But as far as I'm concerned, he

did. He saved millions of lives. If we'd had to invade those islands over there, from the stories I get from my friends over in the Pacific, shoo, they'd have died by the millions.

DePue: I do want to spend a little bit more time talking to you about your life after you came back, because you've indicated there are a couple stories that are important for us to collect. But, we've been at this for over an hour, so do you want to—

Belton: Oh, holy mackerel! It's twenty to 1:00!

DePue: Yeah, we've been at it for two hours, and we're closing in on fourteen minutes here. So, do you want to maybe pick this up some other time, and we can have a pretty short session the next time?

Belton: Well, I'll leave it up to you. We can do that. Would you like to go down and have some lunch or something or—

DePue: Well, that might sound like the right thing to do.

Belton: Well, maybe we could finish it up then and go down and have some lunch and finish it up some other time.

DePue: Do you want to keep driving on now, or would you like to take lunch and then come back?

Belton: Oh, I don't know. It's twenty to 1:00. Let's go down. I think they're having chili. I was going to have a bowl of chili. They have other...I've got the menu there; I don't know what they have.

DePue: Well, we'll stop right now then.

Belton: Okay.

(end of interview #2)

Interview with Kenneth "Tuck" Belton

VR2-A-L-2012-042.03

Interview # 3: Friday, November 16, 2012

Interviewer: Mark DePue

COPYRIGHT

The following material can be used for educational and other non-commercial purposes without the written permission of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. "Fair use" criteria of Section 107 of the Copyright Act of 1976 must be followed. These materials are not to be deposited in other repositories, nor used for resale or commercial purposes without the authorization from the Audio-Visual Curator at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, 112 N. 6th Street, Springfield, Illinois 62701. Telephone (217) 785-7955

Note to the Reader: Readers of the oral history memoir should bear in mind that this is a transcript of the spoken word, and that the interviewer, interviewee and editor sought to preserve the informal, conversational style that is inherent in such historical sources. The Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library is not responsible for the factual accuracy of the memoir, nor for the views expressed therein. We leave these for the reader to judge.

DePue: Today is Friday, November 16, 2012. This is my second session today and my third session overall with Tuck Belton. Good afternoon, Tuck.

Belton: How you do?

DePue: Well, thank you very much for lunch. That was wonderful.

Belton: I'm sure glad you enjoyed it.

DePue: And we needed to take a break, because we'd been at it for over two hours, but—

Belton: I didn't realize we had been at it for two hours, but I looked at my clock and sure enough.

DePue: Well, you had a lot of interesting, very important stories that I certainly am thrilled that we had a chance to preserve and help you do that. But we've got you back home. But I'm going to start with this question. When you were over in Holland, with the Dutch Underground, and you were hungry and eating tulips—maybe feeling fortunate, sometimes, that you had that—and losing over fifty pounds, obviously, what food were you dreaming about?

Belton: (laughs) Oh golly, let's see. Well, I remember... Back in those days, I ate a lot of ice cream. I loved ice cream. And there was several times I could just see a big ice cream cone, sort of, you know, kind of melting down the sides.

(laughs) I remember thinking a lot about having a nice ice cream cone, for one thing. What else? Well, you'd probably laugh at some of the things I mention, but coming up during the Depression, in a small town and with a family that didn't have anything, I'd dreamed a lot about a good bowl of bean soup. (laughs) Can you imagine? And cornbread and fried squirrel and gravy and wild...

I was a hunter all my life; I hunted everything. Well, in fact, during the Depression, we practically lived off the land, because my dad couldn't work, and my mom, she done housework and she cooked cinnamon rolls, which I pedaled around town, for twelve cents a dozen. Anyway, to make a few bucks. I remember one time my father came in, laid his hand down like that on the table, and he said, "There's every penny I have." He raised his hand; there was a \$50 bill in it. That was it. We had lost our home. It was not an easy go in those days.

DePue: I can relate to everything you remember that you were dreaming about having a chance to eat, except maybe the squirrel.

Belton: (laughs) Well, I loved squirrel. I used to bring a squirrel home. Of course, I'd clean them all up. My wife, she didn't want any part of it. Finally I got her so that she would fry the squirrel. One night I said, "Let's try to fool the kids. Let's tell them"—They were small. I said, "Let's try to fool the children, and tell them it's fried chicken." She says, "Okay." So we had fried squirrel. Well it took about two bites for my oldest daughter, and she, she knew it was squirrel. (laughs) So, anyhow, what was it? Oh, mushrooms. They all loved wild mushrooms. I used to do a lot of that.

DePue: Morels?

Belton: Morels. Oh, man. Well, you've seen that picture that had that seventeen-inch Morel that...Didn't you see that picture in there?

DePue: I'm going to have to take another look at that one.

Belton: Okay. It weighed a pound. My wife spotted it, just the very top of it, out at Spring Creek. When I seen it, I said, "Oh, get back, get back." We had to separate all the leaves. It was a trophy. (both laugh)

DePue: Well, let's get you back to late 1945. You've just heard now, that the A-bomb had been dropped. And it wasn't too long after that, just a couple days after that, still in middle August, that the Japanese actually surrendered. When did you get discharged?

Belton: I've never been discharged. I got a certificate of service. For several years after I got home, I would get letters from the adjutant general that, due to the MOS [military occupation specialty code] I had and "due to ever-present emergency, you won't be discharged," and so forth. But finally, I got a

certificate of service. But, when I got that... This was back, I'm going to say, in September or October of 1942.

DePue: What did you intend to do in late '45, with the rest of your life?

Belton: Late '45—

DePue: Did you want to go to work? Did you want to go to school?

Belton: I thought about going to school, but then I had worked for several months for Western Electric, and I knew I had a job there. If I came back and went to work, I could bridge the three years that I was gone, with them. So I came back, and I went to work for Western Electric and worked a little while for them. I got a couple promotions. And I ended up working in two or three different states, doing installation of telephone equipment [in] offices. I stayed with them until 1950. I got ten years with them. I had a pretty good job with Western, but I got a chance to transfer to Illinois Bell.

I wanted to get off the road, of course. I travelled with Western Electric. I spent four years in Wisconsin. I worked in Detroit, and I worked in California once, in Oakland, and was gone quite a bit. I didn't care too much for that, especially after we started having children and raising a family and everything.

DePue: You mentioned, in our last interview that, well, let's face it, your wartime experiences were quite different than the vast majority of other veterans coming back. Did you have a hard time readjusting to being a civilian?

Belton: No, I don't think so. Like I told you previously, I know I was kind of—I don't know how to say it—hard to get along with or hard to live with, because of the conditions I had been under during the war, talking about my immediate family and my wife, especially. Then we had the misfortune, of course, with our first daughter and no money. It wasn't an easy time. But, I really enjoyed it. We didn't have any money or anything like that but, man, we had some wonderful times, when we were broke and—

DePue: From what you talked about before, did you have some nightmares, sometimes?

Belton: Yeah. When I first got back, I had a tough time. I don't know if it was dreams or nightmares or what, but occasionally I would—

DePue: Jump?

Belton: Jump out of bed or make some disturbance. I know that really... My wife worried about that.

DePue: Did she suggest that you had changed, when you came back?

Belton: No, I don't recall ever...I don't think we ever talked about too much of a change, other than I was different in that respect. But after a while, that kind of wore off, and I got over that. I think it was just...The reason I was that way, I think, was because I lived under those conditions for several months, there in Holland. You know, you didn't trust anybody. You had to be careful what you said. And you had to be careful where you went. Your life was entirely different than it was [at] home, where you were free to say and do what you wanted and so forth.

DePue: Did you talk to Virginia or anybody else about the experiences you'd had?

Belton: Well, I'll tell you the truth, Mark. I guess I went probably—I'm going to say thirty years—and I had a difficult time talking like this, very difficult. So many times, when I'd think about it, I would get emotional and couldn't talk about it.

Finally, I joined some military organizations. Their thought—the one club I belonged to—was the idea to bring out a lot of these experiences and talk to high schools and civic organizations, to preserve the World War II experience. They more or less convinced me that it would be the right thing to do, to tell about the experiences and try to keep those things alive for generations to come.

So, I signed up, and I went to Petersburg and Rochester and talked to the high schools, elementary and high. Mostly on Veterans Day, we done that. If they invited you, why, we would go. Sometimes we'd contact people and make arrangements to go. What I seen...One of the first places I done that was Porta. Eight hundred and fifty kids there. And I'm telling you...I thought, well, what am I getting into? You could have heard a pin drop in that gymnasium, from the time I started until...I was supposed to have twenty minutes, and I used forty. But the principal didn't mind. I give him one of these books to put in their library and so forth.

But those children, they were all eyes, all ears and eyes, just quiet; you could've heard a pin drop. And I thought, it's amazing. You know, they wanted to hear it. They were hungry to get that information. Afterwards, I said, "If you've got any questions, come on down." Questions galore. I couldn't stay and answer all the questions. There were just too many of them.

Then I sat with some of them—They give us a luncheon afterwards—and I sat with some of them. They just, question after question, just bang, bang, bang, you know. They were interested, and I was quite surprised at that. After that, I thought, well, it's worth doing. If I can convey my experiences to let them remember this into their generation and so forth, it's worthwhile.

DePue: You said it was about thirty years. And you'd mentioned, in our last interview, that...It sounds like you actually went back to Holland in 1978, which is roughly thirty-some years afterwards.

Belton: It was our thirty-fifth wedding anniversary. I can tell you exactly when it was. We had talked about going to Holland several times, but we had to get the kids through school. Both of them got through college and everything.

DePue: Well, certainly, Virginia had to know that this is going to be an emotion-filled trip for you, going back.

Belton: I can't tell you, (emotionally) it was fantastic. What was that program on TV, *King for a Day* or *Queen for a Day*? Boy, this was for a week. They paid everything, all of our... Well, I'll go back a little bit. It was our thirty-fifth anniversary, and we'd talked about going, but we didn't think we had the money with, you know...

Anyhow, I got a letter from Cowboy Ted. He says, "Bill, we're having a North Holland Resistance Force reunion. There'll be all kinds of people there and food and everything. We want you and Virginia to come as our guests. All you have to do is pay for your airfare." I looked at Ginny, and I says, "If we're going, this is the time."

That was the first time we went to Holland. And like you say, I just couldn't tell you, but everyday we'd go... We had a hotel room and all paid for, flowers there every night. We couldn't even buy an ice cream cone on the street. But anyhow... What was I going to say? Something about the trip. Huh, can't remember what it was.

DePue: Some of the emotions that you encountered, going?

Belton: Well, see, I'd never seen the... There's a memorial in Midwoud to the rest of my crew. You may have seen a picture of it in the World War II vet website. I'd never seen that, of course. And I'd never been to the site where our plane had come down, except where I had landed. And they [the Dutch Underground] got me out of there right away.

But anyhow, we had this big reunion at this hotel. You wouldn't believe the food and the people and the gifts. We went to all kinds of village halls and spoke to different people. It was just... I'd say at night, when we'd go to bed, I'd say, "That's the highlight; we can't get anything higher tomorrow." Well, tomorrow would be higher, higher, higher and higher.

I think, the second day we were there, why, we were going to the memorial. I was kind of dreading that. And Cowboy Ted, one of my good buddies, he talked to Virginia, and he says, "If you don't mind"— He couldn't speak too good a English, but you could understand what he was trying—he

was telling Ginny, he said he'd like to take me, by myself, to the memorial, before the rest of them all got there. He was very thoughtful, very thoughtful.

DePue: That's so you could have a little bit of private time there?

Belton: Yeah...he was a good buddy (emotional). I think he probably shed as many tears as I did. Oh, there's still, to this day, a American flag and a Dutch flag there. And every Commencement Day, that's what they call Memorial Day over there. They have bands and speeches. The kids...A certain grade in the grade school maintain that memorial, all the time, flowers and—

DePue: Do you have the perception that the Dutch people appreciated what the Americans and the Brits had done?

Belton: They'd get up on their soapbox and tell you what they thought of America. It was all good in those days; I don't know how it is today. But every one of the guys that I was with, they just worshipped America.

 Toffy Hofland, this guy that ended up a millionaire, down in the Caribbean Islands, I visited a couple of times. He always told me, he says, "Bill, don't forget you live in one of the greatest countries." And he says, "Do you see that one dollar bill? That speaks all over this world."

DePue: He still called you Bill, huh?

Belton: Oh, yeah. I still go by Bill. Kick and Trish are about the only two that are still alive, and I get an email from them, "Dear Bill." They were two of the couples that were in our reunion, in the backyard.

DePue: It's a pretty elite group that you were with, a pretty special group.

Belton: Yeah, well, Kick was a...He had a bicycle business. He sold and repaired bicycles in his shop. Cowboy Ted was an insurance salesman. Kick was a schoolteacher, a very intelligent guy. Trenk, I think he was a mechanic. But all walks of life, in the Dutch Underground. Some of them very well educated, and some of them just ordinary individuals, businessmen.

DePue: Tuck, from an American perspective, your experiences were pretty unique. But, have you ever reflected that these people you're talking about, that you knew in the Dutch Underground, they were doing this, they were involved in the underground, years before you got there and after you left?

Belton: And like you said, most of them thought the world and all of the United States, my friends. They just couldn't...And when they came over here, they were just in awe, about the immense size of the fields. I took them around the bean fields and corn fields, watermelon patches and those huge tractors over at Havana. We got up and took pictures. I had a Suburban at the time, and they called it "the 747," (laughs) because they always drove small cars.

DePue: Why don't you tell us more about that? When did that happen, that they came over?

Belton: Nineteen eighty. That was their first trip.

DePue: What was the reason to get them over here?

Belton: Well, I'd gone over to this very large reunion they'd had over there. And I'd made the remark, I said, "Now you guys, some of you, got to come over and visit me." None of them had ever been to America. Steve, of course, was already here. He was living in Miami at the time.

Anyhow, I don't know how it come about. We always wrote back and forth and everything. I invited them to come over. And they said...I think, five of them would come, and they did. Steve and Afra(??) and Trish and Kick and Cowboy Ted. Cowboy Ted's wife, she was a little different. She wasn't as easy to get along with as the rest of them. She was okay, but she was just a little bit different. She just didn't take part in too many things. That was her way. But anyhow, they all came over.

We went and stayed with neighbors, because it filled the house up with them. We just had a wonderful time. Like that picture shows, I had a deck on the back of the house at the time. I had keys made for all of them, from the village of Jerome. [I] had the president present them to the guys from Holland. We had John Davidson. Did you know John? He was a senator here in the state of Illinois for a good...John was a very close friend of my wife, Virginia, and a good friend of mine, too. He came out and gave a speech and presented them all Blue Books, Illinois Blue Books. I had a magician friend that worked for Illinois Bell, and he put on a show.



Tuck Belton hosted a delegation of Dutch officials, and former members of the Dutch underground at his house in Jerome, Illinois in the spring of 1980.

We had about 200 guests in the backyard and food galore. I never seen so much food. Everybody brought dishes. And we had a keg of beer, underneath the maple tree. We just had a wonderful time. That's when they presented me with that certificate, signed by Flip, the commander and so forth. And you mentioned something about after the war. Karen Hasara... Do you remember her? She was mayor.

DePue: Right, the former mayor.

Belton: When she was mayor, they got a letter from the mayor, or whatever his title was, of North Holland, *Kukenheim* they call it. They had sent 1,000 tulip bulbs to Springfield to commemorate the liberation—this was so many years after the war—to celebrate their commemoration of their being liberated by the United States Army. In my name, they sent the tulip bulbs to Springfield, instead of Jerome.

Anyhow, the tulip beds are still down there. I don't know if you're familiar with them. There are plaques on the... If you read the plaque and everything, it tells why they're there.

DePue: Where are these located?

Belton: Well, there's a bed of 500 of them. They're only in the spring, when they bloom, of course, tulips. But in between the library and the firehouse, on Capitol Avenue. There's 500 tulip bulbs there, with a plaque in the ground that tells why they're there. If you walk through there, toward the bridge that connects the buildings, there are 500 more bulbs there, with another lamppost and a plaque on there, telling why the tulip bulbs are there.

DePue: They're both downtown locations?



Tuck Belton received this Certificate in 1980 from the Assistant Commander of the North Holland Resistance Forces, "Kick" (wartime code name) Bohler, during Bohler's visit to Springfield. Bohler's group had rescued Belton after Belton's B-17 was shot down in January, 1945.

Belton: Yeah. But they got mixed up. They thought I was from Springfield. I've often wished that they had come to Jerome, but I don't know if we'd have had the facilities and a place to put them, like they did. I guess, after Karen [Hasara] left, they started digging up that street, Capitol Avenue. You know, they redone it, and they devastated that whole patch. I got in touch with the new public works director, Mark Mahoney. He met me there, and I told him the problems we had had. He assured me there would be new tulips there next year, and they were beautiful. That was just this last spring, and they were really beautiful.

DePue: I wonder what color they sent.

Belton: Red and white.

DePue: Red and white. Is there significance for those two colors?

Belton: Well, I think red, white and blue, but I don't know as they had a... They have a black tulip, but I don't know if there are any blue ones. But that was, the red and the white was... Well, that's the same colors as their flag, red and white, and part of the color—

DePue: Well, that's a pretty good reason to pick those colors then, I'd say.

Belton: Yeah, a good reason, yeah.

DePue: Well, I understand they had a chance to meet a governor, too.

Belton: Oh, yeah. I'll have to tell you about that. Well, I called John Davidson, the senator, and made arrangements to meet him at his office in the state capitol building. He took us all around. And they were very anxious to see all the Lincoln sites and all that.

But anyhow, we're up, just outside the governor's office, big Jim Thompson was the governor. I don't know if you remember him or not. He come out of the governor's office and had a couple of fellows with him. He come walking right toward Cowboy Ted and Kick and Steve and I, the four of us. And I said to one of them, I said, "Well, here comes the governor now." I didn't know the governor. I'd never met him. They come right by us, and I just stepped out, and I said, "Excuse me, governor. Would you have a couple of minutes that I could introduce you to some of my friends from Holland that were a good reason why I'm here today?"

"Oh, absolutely!" you know, real friendly. He was a big guy. So, I introduced him. He shook hands with them. And he talked to us for, I don't know, quite a little while, and wanted to know why they were there and all that. We roughly told him. And he went about his way. I said to Ted—Ted was quite a politician—I said, "Ted, I can't do any better than that. That's the top dog in Illinois." And Ted, boy, I'll tell you, he was walking around with

this...I thought he was going to break all the buttons on his shirt, you know, because he liked that sort of thing.

In fact, when we had our program on the deck there at home, they all got a chance to say...I was emcee and introduced them and all that. But when Ted got up to talk, why he just starts...He was quite a politician. In fact, he knew the...What's the name of the guy from Germany that married the actress' daughter? Anyhow he knew him, had a lot of contacts with him.

He got some unbelievable pensions for a lot of the guys that I knew in the Dutch Underground. Their pensions run \$70,000 a year. I call it the Dutch treat. Of course, the Dutch have a lot of income off of oil in the North Atlantic Ocean.

But he even got...Steve lived over here. He'd been over here for, I don't know how many years. He had a good job with Eastern Airlines in Miami. In fact, every time we'd fly into Miami, Steve, "Don't worry about your baggage, Bill. I'll see that it gets..." If we were going to the Caribbean or wherever. And I forgot what I was going to say. Too many things to talk about! (both laugh)

DePue: Well, that's because you had such a rich life to recall.

Belton: Well, I'll tell you, Mark. I've had a wonderful life. Sometimes I didn't know if I was going to make thirty years old or not, but I had a wonderful life. When I stop and analyze all of it and think about it, I couldn't ask for anything more. I was very, very fortunate that I made it back to my family and very thankful that I did. I just...I got a lot more than I deserve; I'll put it that way.

DePue: Have you ever had moments where...The phrase that some people use is "survivor guilt," that you survived and so many people didn't.

Belton: Well, I've thought and thought and thought and prayed and heard my crew members that I knew personally—It makes a difference if you knew somebody personally than...It's the same no matter who it is. Somebody is in sorrow, because they've lost a brother or husband or whatever. But I didn't have a chance to really get real close. We weren't together that long. We was only together for...Well, I got my crew here in the United States before we went over.

But after overseas, we were only together until January the twentieth. But we got to know each other, and we weren't supposed to...You know, back in those days, they always separated the enlisted people from the officers. But we got together and played a little poker, on the side.

DePue: Did you ever have the feeling that it was meant for you to survive, that you had a special mission in life after that?

Belton: Well, I never got the feeling that I was meant to be alive. But I've got the feeling that, why... More of a question mark than anything. Why did I make it back, and my crew members didn't, and so many friends of mine didn't make it back? Why me? Even to this day, I think, why am I here? I don't have the answer, but there must be some reason.

DePue: Well, I would think that part of the reason is so that you would have the opportunity to tell the story and that we can preserve it, so more people can understand what it is that you and your buddies went through.

Belton: Well, that was our object when we went out and talked to all these kids, in these high schools. But I never really thought about it in that way. I just figured I was a very, very minute part of the war. [I] done what I could do, my share or whatever you want to call it. Just like, what was that saying? It's in the Bible or a song, "a pebble on the beach," you know. When you stop and think about your life, you're just a bit of sand on the beach. You do what you can do and hope it's the right thing and—

DePue: Do you think that the sacrifices you made, during World War II, and the sacrifices that many of your colleagues made, and the ultimate sacrifice, was it worth it?

Belton: I sure like to think it was. I sure like to think it was. I look back at those wars, and the one good thing about it that I usually console myself, I look at Germany and Japan and places like that where we had wars and won, and they're a democracy. That's a good thing. And you kind of console yourself... Or I do, anyhow, thinking of things like that.

But I've often thought I sure hope that... I just hope that everyone, especially in America, realizes what the country went through, the individuals like myself, to keep it what it is today. We just hope that that memory lives on for centuries down the road.

DePue: How do you think that experience, especially being with the Dutch Underground, how did that change you? Or did it change you?

Belton: Well, I've often thought about that. I've thought, well, I lived through the Depression. I was born in '22, so I seen several years of the Depression. And I thought, I was so appreciative of making it through that. Then, along comes World War II, and you give it more thought and you think, well, like I said a while ago, I felt like I done what I could do, done my share, I guess I should say, to preserve what we have today, what little it was. I know it was very little, compared to everything. But I just hope that



*Kenneth "Tuck" Belton
1922-2014*

maybe things will be different. It don't look like they will be, but I sure hope they will.

DePue: I would suspect that if I asked Steve Meyer and Cowboy Ted and Kick and others about whether your sacrifices were worth it, they'd have a resounding, "Yes, absolutely!"

Belton: Well, [they] probably would, because, after all, we done a lot to liberate—I'm speaking of the United States—Holland, of course. It was one of the first countries... Let's see, Poland and I guess Holland was what? Second or third that the Nazis invaded, and one of the last to be liberated. So, they had a long, long, hard road. And they were very appreciative, very appreciative.

Like I said before, they would stand up and tell you how good America was. They were wonderful allies, wonderful people. I don't like to even think about it, but I don't know as we have our place in global society today that we had back in those days. Everybody sort of looked up to the United States. We were sort of the glowing light on the hill for a lot of countries. And I think we've lost some of that, over the years. I don't know why. But maybe someday. I hope and pray that someday we'll be back up here, with our beam going all over the place.

DePue: Well, as we sit here today, there are Americans in Afghanistan. I think we might still have some in Iraq, as well. And those are two of the newer countries that, from our perspective, we would like to think that we helped liberate from tyrants. I don't know that they always look at it that way.

Belton: I've got questions in my mind, though, especially in the Near East, if they will ever accept our way of life. I would certainly hope so, because they have a lot of... Well, the women, for example, in most countries, they don't have the same rights as the men. Maybe they will someday. But after 2,000 years, I just don't know. I hope it's not all in vain.

DePue: Well, do you have any final words for us?

Belton: Oh, gosh, I don't know. Haven't I said enough? (both laugh)

DePue: Why did you agree to do this interview with me, because you've **been** interviewed before?

Belton: Oh, yeah, several times. Oh, I don't know. Like I said some time ago, the more I can spread my experiences around—even though, for the first thirty years I didn't even want to talk about it—I decided it'd be a good thing to pass my experiences down to the next generation and hope that, in years to come, they'll remember World War II. That's the basic reason.

DePue: Well, that's my charter, to make sure we do preserve the story and do help continue telling that story.

Belton

Interview # VR2-A-L-2012-042.01

Belton: Well, I wish you the best of luck.

DePue: Well, you've made it possible. Thank you very much, Tuck. It's been wonderful.

Belton: Well, I've enjoyed the interview. I hope that you got all the information you needed, and I wish you well on your way.

DePue: Thank you very much.

(end of interview #3)