Interview with Gene Bleuer

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Interviewer: Mark DePue

DePue: Today is Tuesday. It is the eighteenth of December, 2007. I'm here with Gene Bleuer. Am I pronouncing that correctly? [blue-er]

Bleuer: Correct.

DePue: Okay. Gene Bleuer. Gene is a Korean War veteran, with the unfortunate distinction of being a POW during the Korean War. So, much of what we talk about today, obviously, is going to be about that, Gene. On record here, I do want to say I really appreciate your willingness to do this. I know that this isn't an easy thing for you to do, nor should it be an easy thing to do. We always like to start, though, with background information. Tell me when and where you were born.

Bleuer: I was born in Rock Island, IL, July 2, 1929.

DePue: Okay. So just a few months before the beginning of the Depression.

Bleuer: Right.

DePue: What did your folks do around town there? Where was your father employed?

Bleuer: My biological father abandoned my mother. And so my mother was supporting ... after I was born. She worked at the Rock Island Arsenal as a hostess. I mean, in the cafeteria. She also worked at the Singer sewing machine company to teach sewing to different customers, and she was the one that supported us.

DePue: This is the Depression years—

Bleuer: Yes.

DePue: — and so very tough years, I would imagine, for the family, but at least she had some employment.

Bleuer: Right.

DePue: Do you recall much about the Depression years?

Bleuer: No. No, not really.

DePue: Do you remember Pearl Harbor? You would have been about eleven or so.

Bleuer: Oh, yes. Yes, I remember Pearl Harbor. I was probably thirteen years old. I remember being with my grandfather and my grandmother, and they were going to the Turners' home, the Turners in Moline, where my grandfather was a member. And that's the place where they all went on Sundays to have a couple of beers and a few pretzels. (laughs)

DePue: Did you have any appreciation at the time for what that news meant?

Bleuer: No, not really. I think it just kind of took us by surprise. But my grandfather—I can remember he was shocked, horrified, and so then we—from that, we played off of that, you know, that it must really be bad, so...

DePue: For the next four years, the United States at war with both Japan and Germany, did you follow the war pretty closely?

Bleuer: Yes. Yes, I did. I delivered papers on the arsenal. I delivered *Times* and *Rock Island Argus* on the arsenal. And during that period of time when I delivered papers over there, some Italian prisoners were taken over to the arsenal, and placed over there. I can remember selling papers to them. But I didn't like them, because I knew they were the enemy. But I wasn't real sure (laughs) — I guess maybe I was twelve. But it was right in that area.

DePue: Yeah. Well, when the war ended, you would have been about fifteen or sixteen years old, then.

Bleuer: Yes, that's right.

DePue: As a young boy at that time, fascinated with what's going on, and paying attention to the both theaters of war, can you describe the mood of the country at that time?

Bleuer: Everybody was dedicated to the war effort. I mean, you know, saving on gas, and saving on meat, and food, and anything that they could — especially tires, you know. Rubber. The whole country was dedicated. I remember going around as a boy, taking the heels off of old shoes, and taking rubber down to Delcroft's junkyard, and selling that to them. We used to get a penny a pound, which is a lot of money (laughs) to us in those days. And then we used to get scrap iron. We'd take that down to the junkyard. The old Case Company had a foundry down there and they'd take the sprues, [unused metal from the casting process] and runners, and what have you out, and dump them in the sand out there. We'd go out down

there when we were kids and hook out the sprue base and the runners out, put them in a cart, and take them down to Delcroft's, and sell them.

DePue: So both being patriotic and making a little money on the side, eh?

Bleuer: Sure. (laughs) An entrepreneur.

DePue: There you go.

Bleuer: I told you, I'm a survivor. (laughs)

DePue: There you go. Did you graduate from high school?

Bleuer: Oh, yes. I graduated from St. Joseph Catholic High School in 1947.

DePue: Was that in Rock Island?

Bleuer: Rock Island, IL.

DePue: Okay.

Bleuer: It's now a jail. (laughs) People ask me, "Where'd you go to high school?" I say, "There." And they say, "Well, that's a jail." I say, "That's where I went to high school."

DePue: That's an interesting transition. What happened for you after high school?

Bleuer: Well, I looked for a job, of course, and it was hard to find jobs. But I got a job. I think it was Coca-Cola Bottling Company, and I was at the back end of that on a soaker for a while, and then putting the used bottles in this cleaning machine. Then I finally got a job at John Deere. I would walk the streets. Finally got a job at John Deere. I went in as a worker in the place where they crated up corn planters.

DePue: Where they crated up what?

Bleuer: Corn planters.

DePue: Oh, okay.

Bleuer: Two- and four-row corn planters in wood. Then, I'd say about 1947 late, I joined the National Guard, 44th Division, Battery B.

DePue: Was this Battery B the 123rd Field Artillery?

Bleuer: No. 223rd.

DePue: 223rd. Was that in Rock Island?

Bleuer: Rock Island, IL.

DePue: What did they have for equipment at the time?

Bleuer: 105 pallets. And —

DePue: Okay. Why did you join the National Guard?

Bleuer: I was a little worried about going to the service. I wanted to be able to get some rank, and maybe I wouldn't have to go. Me and President Bush. Oh! I shouldn't have said that, right?

DePue: (laughs) Well, you wouldn't have been the only one, like so many people joining the National Guard at that time. There was a draft in those years.

Bleuer: Yes. Yep, because I was, you know, in the draft, of course. And if I hadn't have joined the National Guard, why, I'd had to go in the draft. I would have been drafted before. Because some of the guys who were in high school with me were already drafted. There was more than just me from my class, in 1947. I think there was about four of us in that class. I can't remember all their names, but...

DePue: Was it a way for the four of you to kind of stay together, do your military duty, and stay in the area at the same time?

Bleuer: Yeah, yeah. I think we knew eventually we were going to be activated and have to go, but...

DePue: But this was 1947, right?

Bleuer: Yes.

DePue: Okay.

Bleuer: Okay. That's a good point. I'll try to remember that. (laughs)

DePue: In June of 1950, you hear the news that North Korea has invaded the South. What was your response to that event?

Bleuer: Well, it won't be long now for us. That we'll be having to go. Because the North Koreans were overrunning the South Koreans, and we'd already dispatched a couple of divisions over there. MacArthur did. And he was calling for more help from home, I think. MacArthur. And so it was just a question of time before we had to go. In earnest, the National Guard at that point was really training hard so it would be ready. And we were. Well, you know, as ready as we could have been.

DePue: Sure. Were you married by this time?

Bleuer: Yes. I got married... No, that wasn't true. I got married December 1, 1951.

DePue: Okay.

Bleuer: Which is just after I got orders for Korea.

DePue: Well, that's an interesting time to get married.

Bleuer: Yeah.

DePue: What was your fiancée's name?

Bleuer: Alice Larsen.

DePue: Okay. So, in June of 1950, the North Koreans attack. For the next year, then, apparently the Illinois National Guard got much more serious about training.

Bleuer: Yes.

DePue: Toward the end of that, you got much more serious about getting married as well.

Bleuer: Yeah. Right. I felt, Well, hey, I go to Korea, I might get killed, and I want to live my life, you know, before I go. You kind of have that attitude. And — of course —

DePue: Had you and Alice been going together for quite some time?

Bleuer: Hmm. Oh, I'd say it's about six months.

DePue: Okay.

Bleuer: Um-hm. She worked at John Deere Planter where I worked. She was a telephone operator. I was a wrench monkey, crater out there, crating up corn planters. And then I got taken in the office because of my drawing ability –into the engineering department –and put in the experimental engineering up over at John Deere. When they finally activated us to the Guard unit, to the Forty, to go to Camp Cooke.

DePue: So you were inducted: — I have orders here that say, "17 October 1951."

Bleuer: Yes.

DePue: You said you were married when?

Bleuer: December 1, 1951.

DePue: So even though you've got orders here in October, you didn't go for a couple months yet.

Bleuer: No. That's probably when we speeded up the marriage.

DePue: Okay. You mentioned Camp Cooke. That's in California. Is that where —

Bleuer: Yes.

DePue: — the whole division went for training, then?

Bleuer: Yes. Except I did not go there. The orders I had were to go to Leadership School in Ft. Riley, Kansas.

DePue: Okay.

Bleuer: In fact, I — yeah, I –

DePue: Do you recall your —

Bleuer: –I think it says there, Ft. Riley, Kansas.

DePue: Okay. Do you recall your rank at that time?

Bleuer: Ah, it —

DePue: Sergeant, First Class, here.

Bleuer: Sergeant, First Class. Right. So after three years in the National Guard, I was chief of section in gunning in the artillery. Chief of the gun section.

DePue: You moved up very quickly, then.

Bleuer: Yes.

DePue: Did you like that experience of being the gunny?

Bleuer: Sure. I didn't mind that at all. I liked it. It was good training. I think we learned a lot about the artillery, especially observing, you know, fire, and bracketing fire in. When we were up in summer training in Wisconsin, why, we used to rotate up to the forward observer point, where he was bracketing in fire. So we got to learn the ins and outs of the artillery, and how to lay out a gun. Yeah. I did enjoy that.

DePue: Did going to Ft. Riley and going to this leadership school take you out of the role of being in the field artillery?

Bleuer: Yes, it did. It was more infantry training type things. You had to break down a .30, and know all the parts, and then you had to know how to field strip your weapon, blindfolded. And you had to learn how to give classes. We got some bayonet training; it was good training.

DePue: You mentioned the .30. Are you talking about the .30 caliber machine gun?

Bleuer: Yes.

DePue: Was this the air cooled? Or the water cooled? Probably the air cooled.

Bleuer: Air cooled.

DePue: Had you volunteered to go into the infantry, or volunteered to go to this leadership school?

Bleuer: No. This was an order. This was given me as an order. I had no choice.

DePue: Okay. (laughs) They didn't ask your opinion about it, huh?

Bleuer: No. (laughs)

DePue: How long were you at Ft. Riley, then?

Bleuer: I told them, "You know, I have been trained in the artillery." And they said, “Well, we need guys in the infantry more than we need in the artillery. (laughs) That's where our casualties are.”

DePue: Yeah. How about that?

Bleuer: Now, that's what they told me in Japan when I got there. See, I got P Com [Pacific Command] orders. When I went to Camp Cooke, after Leadership School, I was there, I want to say a month or better. Maybe it was more. Then I got orders for P Com, which was you had to go to Korea. And when we got to Yokahama in Japan, they said there's going to be twelve guys… We were on a troop ship. When we got off the troop ship, they said, “Twelve of you guys are going to leave for Korea right away.” Of course, my name being B, chances of me going's pretty good. Sure enough, about the third name called was Bleuer. (laughs)

DePue: So you were sent to Japan. Was there some question of what was going to happen to you when you were initially shipped overseas?

Bleuer: Yeah. Some guys got to stay in Japan. But I guess some of the guys later went to Korea, too, off that boat. But we had to leave right away.

DePue: Were all these a group of people who came from the Ft. Riley Leadership School? Did you stay together at that time?

Bleuer: No. No. There were several of us in that leadership school that went to Camp Cooke. Then later, I don't know where they went. I lost track of them after I left Camp Cooke. I lost track of them. I don't know what happened.

DePue: I've talked with several people from the 44th Division, and they all ended up in many different kinds of places. So it illustrates that that particular division did *not* fight as a division. They got split up quite a bit.

Bleuer: Oh, no. We were used in the 44th Division as replacements.

DePue: So your fate was to be an individual replacement?

Bleuer: Yes. They went on training at Camp Cooke. They went to Hunter Liggett. I think Bob Pitts talks about that, going to Hunter Liggett. Often he's asked me, "Didn't you go to Hunter Liggett?" I say, "No, I was already in Korea by that time. When you guys were..."

DePue: So you got over there sooner than most of the rest of the folks in the 44th.

Bleuer: Yes. Much to my chagrin. (laughs)

DePue: Yeah, so much —

Bleuer: Being a coward, you know, you're kind of dragging your feet, hoping you could stay.

DePue: Well, being an E-7, though, did they decide you were more important to them?

Bleuer: Didn't have any choice. You see, that's one of the disadvantages of getting up in rank, you know?

DePue: Well obviously, you got that rank quickly because they saw something and saw a lot of potential in you. Do you remember anything about the trip across the Pacific?

Bleuer: Yeah, I remember leaving Pier 91 at Ft. Lawton, Seattle, Washington; we went out into Puget Sound. But as we left, my wife, at that time, was on the dock, and the Army band was playing "*Auf Wiedersehen*," Till We Meet Again. Have you heard of that song? And I remember that sign up over the entrance to the dock itself. It said, *Through these portals pass some of the finest soldiers in the world.* I thought, Oh, boy. (laughs) I never felt like a fine soldier, I can tell you that! But I felt like I was trained for the artillery, but that's not where I ended up.

DePue: So you didn't necessarily feel like you were trained well enough to be an infantry —E-7 would have been a Platoon Sergeant?

Bleuer: Yes.

DePue: Did you feel like your training was not up to snuff for that particular assignment?

Bleuer: No. I felt insecure.

DePue: I assume at this time, as you left your wife on the dock, you knew that she was pregnant?

Bleuer: Yes. Yes, I knew. And she was mad at me, because I could have gone to the Chaplain and got permission to stay here until after the baby was born. That was at Camp Cooke, when they gave me orders for B Company. But I looked around, and I thought, "Well, that means that if I don't go, somebody else has to go, and I would never be able to look him in the eye afterwards, you know, if anything happened to

him." I thought, "No, it's my duty. Right or wrong, I got to go." She was very unhappy with me.

DePue: She had a different perspective on things, apparently.

Bleuer: I can remember her exact words. I don't think you want to know them. (laughs) She said, "You son of a bitch, you got me pregnant." (both laugh) "Now you're running off." (laughs)

DePue: Anything about the trip itself? A lot of people remember, because it wasn't necessarily a pleasant trip across the ocean.

Bleuer: Well, I think it was a Henry J. Kaiser troop ship. They're, like, they were all steel, all welded together, you know, and every time that boat would go out of the water, it would come down *smash.* We got into some real rough weather; you could hear the screw, you know, when that came out of the water. I was down on the lower part of the troop ship, and it (laughs) was terrible. The first day out wasn't too bad, but the second day, and third day after that was sea sicknesses. Really got into everybody. I was pretty good shape until I got up to the mess hall. In the mess hall they got all lips all the way around the table, you know, so when the ship went this way, the stuff wouldn't slide off the table, it would hit the fence in there. I can remember, the guys were barfing all over the place, and then the puke (laughs) would roll this way.

DePue: Oh, man!

Bleuer: And the food was flopped over. I started to eat. I got one mouthful of food, and I thought, I don't think I want anything more. (laughs)

DePue: There seems to be something universal about being shipped overseas, because everybody has similar stories. Maybe the water was always rough wherever you guys were coursing.

Bleuer: Well, I'm not real sure, but somebody said–I think I remember–that they said, "We're into the tail end of the Wake Island storms" So I guess the troop ship had to go by this point. I can remember those waves coming at this boat. They used to always get upset when you call it a boat. But those waves had to be twenty, thirty foot tall. Man. You take one look out there, and there's no way you want to go out there on deck. (both laugh) I'm surprised that ship didn't break in half, but I guess old Henry J. Kaiser did a good job of welding those together, after all.

DePue: Well, you mention Kaiser. Wasn't he the guy who built all those Liberty ships during World War II, just pumping them out at a horrendous rate?

Bleuer: Right. And that was for hauling troops. But do you know what 5,000 guys on a ship was like? I can remember the deck I was on. There had to be about seven bunks, and you had that much room between them.

DePue: About, what, eighteen inches or so?

Bleuer: Yeah. So the guy that gets in the top bunk, if he gets sick, and he barfs over the side, well, you...

DePue: Oh, man.

Bleuer: (laughs) Look out below!

DePue: You're not painting a pretty picture here, Gene.

Bleuer: Well, it wasn't like the Queen Elizabeth luxury liner, I can tell you that.

DePue: They weren't built for comfort, were they?

Bleuer: No. And of course we were complaining to the swabbies [sailors]. I don't think the swabbies — I think it was the Merchant Marines or something. I can't — Coast Guard? That took us over. I can't—

DePue: I know a lot of Merchant Marines did this.

Bleuer: They were telling us war stories and all, all the way over. I'm sure those guys never even got — never — (laughs)

DePue: So you spent just a few days, it sounds like, in Japan?

Bleuer: Yeah. Oh, no. Just one day.

DePue: Just one day.

Bleuer: When we got off the boat, that's exactly when they made the announcement. So when I got ready to get back on, the next ship was already partially loaded. They were waiting for us, you know, to go to Korea. And when I got ready to get back on, he said, "What's your MOS?" [Military Occupational Specialty] And I told him, ”You know, I don't even remember. 18-0-4, or 18-44, or something?” He said, "No. It's 3-8-44. That's the infantry." I said, "No, I'm in the artillery." He said, "You were. We don't need people in the artillery. We need you (laughs) in the infantry. And I said, "I don't know anything about the infantry." He says, "Oh, you'll learn. Goodbye!"

DePue: Well, thank you very much, huh? But you're still an individual replacement. You don't know what your unit of assignment's going to be yet, do you?

Bleuer: I think he did mention the Fifth RCT. [Regimental Combat Team]

DePue: Okay.

Bleuer: I was going to — yeah. I think — he did.

DePue: So when you got on the ship in Japan headed to Korea —

Bleuer: Yeah.

DePue: –is when you found out you were heading to the Fifth?.

Bleuer: Right. Now, the Fifth was already over there, and they told me that they came from Hawaii, the Fifth RCT. Now, I think —

DePue: Yes, they got over there early in the war. Very early.

Bleuer: Yeah. Right. They needed replacements, because they were hit with casualties, so you got slapped in there, and with being a Platoon Sergeant, you know, (laughs), and what do you do? Of course, they had been through a lot of fighting already.

DePue: Well the Fifth had an illustrious career in Korea, but part of its legacy was that they suffered a high number of casualties. But they'd also had a lot of people who were rotating out because they'd gotten enough points by the time you'd gotten there.

Bleuer: Okay. That could well be.

DePue: Um-hm.

Bleuer: I don't think I remember that part. But I can remember, of course I was in charge of patrol. It was combat patrol we were on. I was leading that and we were ordered to hold this position. I can't remember that much more than that, except that there had to be twenty-some guys in our platoon, in our combat control. Maybe twenty-four. So we did slightly dig in, and we did hold this position, or we started to hold this position. When we were under attack, of course we're out of radio. That's when I got bad feelings about the Lieutenants. (laughs) They're calling you up on the radio, telling, “Hold that position!” (laughs)

DePue: Okay, but that's a little bit ahead of the story here. When you got to Korea, where did you disembark? Was it in Inch’on?

Bleuer: Oh. Inch’on. Yes. Got off the boat at Inch’on.

DePue: Did it take you long to make your way up to the Fifth Regiment?

Bleuer: Uh, yeah. We went by truck. Let's see. Yeah. I remember being on a truck for... a whole day, anyway. So it took us at least a day to get to the outfit.

DePue: Where were you assigned, then? What was the specific platoon and company that you ended up in?

Bleuer: Second Platoon, Company B, of the Fifth RCT. [Regimental Combat Team]

DePue: Company B would have been the First Battalion as well?

Bleuer: Yes.

DePue: Okay. So Second Platoon, Company B, First Battalion of the Fifth RCT. At that the time, were they were attached to the Twenty-Fourth Division, or the Twenty-Fifth?

Bleuer: (pause) Seemed to me like it was the Twenty-Fourth. But maybe it was the Twenty-Fifth. They're both over there.

DePue: Yeah.

Bleuer: Same time.

DePue: What month, roughly, would this have been? 1952. Do you recall the month?

Bleuer: Yeah. It had to be ... I think, October? Because we had Thanksgiving dinner there. They flew that up to us.

DePue: Okay. So it was in the fall of 1952, when you got there.

Bleuer: Yeah.

DePue: Were they in the frontlines at that time?

Bleuer: Yeah. Yes. Yes.

DePue: On your first day in the Fifth was the unit on the front?

Bleuer: Yes.

DePue: Can you recall anything about your impressions on finally arriving at the frontlines?

Bleuer: Oh. Yeah. (laughs) I — well, I was scared to death. I was afraid I was going to get killed. I could hear all that gunfire, and shells going off, and the closer we got to that line, I — you're going to have a hell of an impression made. (laughs) But I was, I was afraid. But I knew I had a job to do, so I was going to do it.

DePue: Did you think part of your being so unsettled about this was because you didn't feel confident in the training you had as an infantry —?

Bleuer: Uh, well, I told you earlier, I was a born coward. Yeah, I think that had something to do with it. But I, ... just blood. If it's your blood, you know, I could stand looking at it; but when it's my blood, I don't like to look at that. And major surgery to me is when they're taking a splinter out of my finger. Minor surgery to me is that they're operating on your brain.

DePue: Now you're also assigned as a Platoon Sergeant, were you not?

Bleuer: Yes.

DePue: Can you talk a little bit about the platoon you had? Were you one of the few new people in that platoon?

Bleuer: No. There was more. There was a lot of guys in there. But about half of the platoon, I guess, was veterans and the other half were the replacements. I think one of the things that worried me the most was that the guys—the privates and the PFC's [private first class] and what have you—they look up to you to lead them, you know, as a Platoon Sergeant. They're looking to you for advice, what to do. And, quite frankly, I really didn't know.

DePue: And they were often the ones who had the experience in the frontlines.

Bleuer: So I had to listen to a Corporal. (laughs)

DePue: How about the Lieutenant? Was there a Lieutenant with the Platoon at the time?

Bleuer: Yeah, but he stayed back at the CP. the Command Post, on the radio; he would issue orders up to us by radio. I know you don't want to hear that, but that's the way it was.

DePue: So you didn't see the Lieutenant much?

Bleuer: Saw him once, yep.

DePue: That's it? One time?

Bleuer: One time.

DePue: How about the Company Commander?

Bleuer: I saw him once.

DePue: And the First Sergeant?

Bleuer: Oh, yeah. You never get away from the first dog. (both laugh)

DePue: So who of these kinds took you —

Bleuer: The Sergeants ran the war.

DePue: Yeah. Did the First Sergeant take you under his arm and try to teach you a few things?

Bleuer: Oh, yeah. You know, it was the best he can. Hey, you're under pressure to get things done, you know? To defend a position. And he can only spend so much time with you.

DePue: What was the terrain like? What was your position?

Bleuer: Hills. Hills—I'd call them mountains, but they're hills. Big hills. And the position was, of course, getting towards winter, you know? And it was snow coming down. Cold. Frozen Chosin, is what they called it. And, it…very cold. Worst thing about it all was the cold weather.

DePue: Did you have decent equipment, decent clothing for that?

Bleuer: Yeah, it wasn't too bad. We had parkas, and we had boots. Combat boots and mittens.

DePue: Did you have the Mickey Mouse boots by that time?

Bleuer: No. Not that — not at that point. You're talking about as a prisoner?

DePue: No, even when you're up in the frontlines there. You know, those insulated boots the Army was issuing.

Bleuer: Uh, yeah. We had insulated boots.

DePue: Okay.

Bleuer: Yes. But... The Chinese took them away from us.

DePue: Well, let's not get to that too quickly here. How long were you in the frontlines in your unit before that incident where you're actually captured?

Bleuer: Uh...

DePue: Couple months, then? Maybe a month and a half?

Bleuer: Yes. I was going to say a month and a half. I guess about a month and a half.

DePue: Tell me, you mentioned Thanksgiving. You got Thanksgiving dinner while you were in the frontlines?

Bleuer: Yeah. They brought it up on a helicopter. It was big aluminum kettles on each side of that helicopter, one of them had mashed potatoes and gravy, and the other had turkey, over on the other side. The problem is that the enemy fire, got close to the helicopter, and he wouldn't land. So he came back, like a day or so after Thanksgiving, and dropped it. By that time, they had reheated the stuff, and the turkey was burned, and tasted like hell. (both laugh)

DePue: So you got Thanksgiving Day a day late?

Bleuer: Yeah. (laughs)

DePue: Do you — Go ahead.

Bleuer: We had to do away with the napkins. (laughs) I'm being facetious. But that turkey was really bad. I mean, it burned. They got it burned on the bottom. They put this aluminum kettle, I guess, on their wood. Had to start to try to heat it up that way, and of course it started burning on the bottom, and then the smell got all the way through the whole thin. But we ate part of it. (laughs) Pretty hard to eat.

DePue: You mentioned your platoon leader. How many people would have been in that platoon?

Bleuer: ... Well, overall in the platoon, there had to be a hundred, hundred and some men.

DePue: Well, that would have been a very large platoon for Korea, I think.

Bleuer: Yeah.

DePue: Were there some Koreans with you?

Bleuer: Uh, no.

DePue: No KATUSAs? [Korean Augmentees to the United States Army]

Bleuer: No. No.

DePue: Okay. So this is a purely American outfit.

Bleuer: No Noggies.

DePue: Have some blacks in your platoon, then?

Bleuer: Oh, yeah. Sure.

DePue: This was a fairly new experiment for the United States Army. Any thoughts about how well the integration of the military was going?

Bleuer: With our outfit? Just beautiful. In fact, I owe my life to Jasper P. Means and to F. G. Dawson. They dug me out when I was buried alive.

DePue: Again, that's going to happen here later. What was the second name? Jasper Means and —

Bleuer: Jasper P. Means. And F. G. Dawson. They were from North Carolina, I believe.

DePue: So once you get to the frontlines, all that baggage that we carry as Americans, at that time at least, kind of becomes meaningless?

Bleuer: Oh, yeah. Yeah. It's — (laughs)

DePue: Was your position that you guys were occupying a series of bunkers?

Bleuer: The positions, yes. Initially, they were that. And you were sent out of that. The platoons were.

DePue: On patrols?

Bleuer: Yes.

DePue: You mentioned this one patrol earlier. Is that a fairly typical patrol that you had?

Bleuer: Yeah. We were all assigned. There was several Sergeants that were assigned patrols, and when your name came up, you're...

DePue: How many people normally went on these patrols? Did they vary?

Bleuer: 24, 25. They called them combat patrols, and being a West Pointer, you probably know more about that than I do. But (laughs) well, how many there are supposed to be, and, you know, how many... But we were not the best trained soldiers, and especially myself—I don't want to, any fault with the rest of the guys—but myself, I was not that well trained.

DePue: How often did the officers go on the patrols with you?

Bleuer: I never saw them go.

DePue: Neither the Captain nor the Lieutenant went with you?

Bleuer: No.

DePue: Well, that says something, too, doesn't it?

Bleuer: I told you. The Sergeants ran the war. Whether we ran it bad or not, well, that's — (laughs)

DePue: So you didn't even see your Lieutenant enough get much of an impression of him?

Bleuer: No. No, I don't recall that much about him. Except that... An officer, he said he's in charge, so (laughs) we saluted him. (laughs). Especially saluting him.

DePue: Yeah. Well, I would have thought up in the frontlines, they didn't necessarily like that.

Bleuer: No, they don't. And that's why you always offered to Blitz cloth his bar, so it shines nice. (laughs) That the gook had something to shoot at. (laughs)

DePue: Okay. I think I get the picture here, Gene. (laughs) Can you —

Bleuer: I don't blame them. I wouldn't go up there if I didn't have to go either. You can't blame a guy when somebody's shooting if he ducks.

DePue: Yeah. But it strikes me, you had that opportunity way back in Seattle to decide not to go, and you decided at that time that was your responsibility.

Bleuer: No. Got to go. But see, it's — you owe something to the guys you serve with, you know? And certainly it's not to run away and hide. It's… You've got to go.

DePue: Well, that's the definition of courage, isn't it? Isn't it, even though you're afraid to do something, you still have that responsibility?

Bleuer: No. The guys with courage we left over there. They're dead.

DePue: Do you recall any combat experiences you had before you were actually captured that you could describe?

Bleuer: On a hillside there was a school. I guess it was a school. It was a hootchie [Korean-style house] building, and we were just checking this out and I was leading the patrol. We were in formation as we were marching towards it, or walking towards it. We got a burst of fire out of there, and one of the guys in my platoon, or one of the guys, got hit, so I waved everybody into attack formation. So we went at it, the building. We blew everything away in that building. Grenades, we threw them in the window. When we got done, there was nothing but women and children in there.

DePue: But somebody had fired from the building?

Bleuer: Yes. Somebody hit one of my men.

(pause)

DePue: Did you come back to the other lines, again, then?

Bleuer: Yeah.

DePue: Now the thing that strikes me about the nature of combat by the time you got there: it seems there were lots of these patrols going on, but there wasn't any intention to seize terrain and hold terrain?

Bleuer: Well, it was like probing. We were always probing at the line, especially if you didn't get much fire out of the Chinese, or the guys that were holding the other side. Why, then you were sent out to scout it out and find out what's going on over there. You know, have they pulled out of those positions? You don't know that unless you go there. Because they're not going to come out and say, "I'm still there!" (laughs) So you got a sector there that you had to go into, and that's when you learn how to use all the landmarks you can to find your way back.

DePue: Was a typical patrol in daylight, or was it in darkness?

Bleuer: Starts out at darkness.

DePue: And oftentimes does it finish up in the early morning hours, then?

Bleuer: Um-hm.

DePue: So this would a very active defense.

Bleuer: Yes.

DePue: I assume the Chinese were doing the same kind of thing to you?

Bleuer: Uh, yes. Yes. They were. They would probe at you. If you didn't get probes from them, you'd go find out why they're not probing at you, because you find out whether they're gone or not. You know, that's your orders. They had fought hard for those positions, so we didn't want to lose any ground. But we were willing to gain it back, because we had it at one time and lost it.

DePue: When you got there it seems like, at least at the higher levels, there wasn't any serious intent to regain territory in the north, at least not big chunks.

Bleuer: No. Seemed like it was kind of like a stalemate there. You know?

DePue: Did that make sense to you?

Bleuer: No. No. Why, for a worthless hill, to lose all these men?

DePue: And then turn around and walk away from it again.

Bleuer: Yeah. Yeah. ... No. We paid for those hills in blood. It was terrible.

DePue: I don't want to get too far ahead, but I want you to just reflect a little bit upon the Chinese soldiers that you encountered while you were in the frontlines—not afterwards, after you were captured, but while you were in the frontlines—about their dedication, their tactics, et cetera.

Bleuer: Well, they were not well trained. When I can recall .... Whether they sent their worst troops at us to start with, to run us out of ammo, I don't know that, but they — when we got in, like, when I was captured, way in these positions, we fired all our ammo up, and we had bayonets fixed, and so we used those. The bodies, they just kept coming. We hid behind the bodies, and we finally ended up using the M-1 as a baseball bat trying to bat them away. They'd just drag you down. You're it.

DePue: Can you give us some of the background that set up when you're actually captured.

Bleuer: Yeah.

DePue: Are you willing to talk a little bit about the specific situation? ... Was this a patrol that you had gone on?

Bleuer: Yeah. Yeah. In fact, it was one I was in charge of. At that point, I was the guy that led the patrol. But of course, the person who was in charge of it was a Lieutenant, but he was not there. ... Can I have the question again?

DePue: Be specific here. About twenty-some people on this patrol?

Bleuer: Yeah. Twenty.

DePue: Was it an ambush patrol, or a recon patrol? What was your mission?

Bleuer: Probing recon. Yeah. And it was to hold this position. After we got to this spot, we were supposed to hold that until they came up and relieved us. We were supposed to stay there and hold that.

DePue: Was this for the main line of resistance?

Bleuer: Yes.

DePue: How far forward would you have been?

Bleuer: Oh, seventy miles.

DePue: That far?

Bleuer: Yeah.

DePue: That has to be very close to the enemy lines, then.

Bleuer: Oh, yeah. We were in the enemy lines. We were probing at the enemy line.

DePue: Okay. Sometimes it's hard for me to comprehend this, because it's not like a continuous trench line. There are strong points.

Bleuer: Oh, no. ... I've often thought about that. Why we were doing what we were doing was never really clear to me. Why we had to do this or that. And in fact, that's what I told the Chinese officer. He wanted to know who was on the right side of you and who was on the left side of, and you're only supposed to give him your name, rank, and serial number. Well, luckily, that's all I knew. I didn't have anything else to give them, because I didn't know who was on the right side of me and who was on the left side, when you're projecting into the line. I hope the ROK [Republic of Korea] unit was over there, but I'm not sure they were or weren't.

DePue: Whether or not there was another patrol that had gone out that far, you had no idea.

Bleuer: Yeah. Yeah. No.

DePue: It's going to be difficult, I think, but that's okay. Was this a night patrol that you had gone on?

Bleuer: Yes. Started at night.

DePue: Then you had to stay in that position into the daylight?

Bleuer: Yes.

DePue: Apparently, then, the Chinese attacked you.

Bleuer: And we were going to bring more of our platoon up. More of the platoon was coming up to relieve us.

DePue: So how long were you there, then, when you were attacked by the Chinese?

Bleuer: Oh, God. Uh, almost … immediately. We walked right into a trap. I mean, they were waiting for us.

DePue: Okay. Was this still in darkness?

Bleuer: Yeah. Right.

DePue: So everybody got in the perimeter, and started...

Bleuer: Yeah, well, you do what you got to do. You dug in, and started firing back. And like I said, we even used ... their dead bodies to hide behind. .

DePue: Are you willing to talk a little bit about the actual moment of being captured, then?

Bleuer: Yeah. They drug me down, just (coughs) ... Well. It's never a ... never a pleasant thing to have to kill people. I don't care if they are Chinese, you know? (sighs)

DePue: How many other members of your platoon were captured at the same time?

Bleuer: All of us.

DePue: So —

Bleuer: The ones that were living. There was only four of us left by the time they got done, time the Chinese overwhelmed us.

DePue: Had you been injured?

Bleuer: No. Marvelously so. I got a bayonet scrape right through my groin there. When he came at me, he missed me, but it did scratch. Tore my uniform. And hurt my shoulder when I got a rifle butt in it. Actually, I wasn't hurt that bad. I could have kept fighting. But... But I, I gave up.

DePue: Well, I'm sure you were overwhelmed by the Chinese by that time.

Bleuer: Yeah.

DePue: How about the other three? Were any of them injured?

Bleuer: No, they were… they were okay too.

DePue: But the majority of the platoon was killed, then?

Bleuer: Yeah. And if they weren't by then, Chinese were putting them away. They don't take wounded prisoners.

DePue: Can you recall, or are you willing to talk about those first few hours of being a captive, then?

Bleuer: Well, yeah, they — I like to — they had us line, stand out, and take off all our parkas and our boots. Of course, they took our weapons away from us. They tied our hands behind our back, and put a rope around each guy's neck, and they led us over, away. But... They told us we were going to be killed, and they told us that ... had to have one. And we got up to… We marched — we had to march for at least several days. And they… they didn't give us any water. We had to take the buttons off our uniforms and stick them in our mouth. You know, to keep the… saliva going.

DePue: Did they take your boots, too?

Bleuer: Yeah, they took our boots.

DePue: So you're walking on stocking feet?

Bleuer: No, they gave us those. I thought you were talking about Mickey Mouse shoes.

DePue: Yeah.

Bleuer: Yeah. Yeah. They gave us some gook boots. They took our boots.

DePue: How long after you were captured were you first interrogated?

Bleuer: It had to be about three days. I guess about the third day. And he was... To my surprise, he was a graduate of the University of Stanford. Spoke fluent English, better than you and I. And he… you didn't bullshit him.

DePue: By this time, you had already been walking for two or three days.

Bleuer: Yeah.

DePue: Had you had any sleep in that time period?

Bleuer: No.

DePue: Any food?

Bleuer: No. We got food when we got to the compound. If you could eat it.

DePue: Did any of the Chinese that captured you at the front speak any English at all?

Bleuer: Uh... very little. Mainly they were celebrating. They thought we were a real prize. Laughing at us.

DePue: And there was just the four of you throughout these first few days?

Bleuer: And then they brought some more in, into that compound. GIs. I don't know where they got them.

DePue: But that was after you got to a compound.

Bleuer: Yeah. Yeah.

DePue: Well, Gene, again, this might be a very difficult question for you to answer, but can you explain your emotions during these first few hours? What's going through your mind?

Bleuer: How hopeless it was, and how hopeless I felt. I knew I was never going to see home again. ... And, uh... I'm wondering why I was there.

DePue: Did you think about your wife?

Bleuer: Yeah.

DePue: Your baby wasn't born yet, at that time?

Bleuer: No. My baby was born January 4 of '51, but I never found out about it until ... It had to be March, I think.

DePue: Do you recall the date that you were captured? What the specific date was?

Bleuer: No. That part is real fuzzy to me. I can remember how many days it was in the beginning, because you obviously keep track of the days. But I guess overall it was about ninety-one days.

DePue: Well it sounds like you were captured somewhere between Thanksgiving and Christmastime, because you mentioned earlier —

Bleuer: Yeah.

DePue: — today that you knew you spent Christmas in captivity.

Bleuer: Well, they played Christmas carols to us in the camp.

DePue: What was the reason for that?

Bleuer: Oh, to laugh at us.

DePue: Was it four days before you got to a compound, then? Or three days?

Bleuer: Three days.

DePue: So it wasn't until you reached the compound that you were interrogated?

Bleuer: That's the only time.

DePue: Okay. What was it that this guy wanted to find out?

Bleuer: Oh. Who, what outfits were on each side of me and did I realize that I was a typical capitalist over there. Did I realize killing people, we're over there murdering the poor North Koreans, and why we had to come over there and destroy their land, and what are we doing there for, and who sent me over there, and —

DePue: It sounds like once the interrogation begins, he wasn't really looking for any hard, specific information.

Bleuer: No.

DePue: Is that because he figured that you probably didn't know that much anyway?

Bleuer: After he found out that I didn't know anything, he kind of...

DePue: Was there any torture involved?

Bleuer: They put, like a bucket, on your head, and if you gave them an answer they didn't like, they'd beat on that with wooden spoons. Maybe fifteen minutes, they'd just do that.

DePue: So, the vibration of the bucket on top of your head would —

Bleuer: That just racketed your ears. You know, you're scared to death anyway. You think you're going to die, and... What was it Shakespeare said? You know, I thought of that when I was there. Shakespeare said that cowards die many times before their death. A brave man but once. And... (laughs)

DePue: Well, I suspect if that's the definition of a coward, then God made a lot more cowards than he made brave men.. Can you describe the compound you were at? Do you know its location?

Bleuer: Oh. P'yongyang as well(??).

DePue: Was it close to the capital?

Bleuer: On the outskirts. On the outside of it. In fact, it would be south of there, like, and to the west — to the — let's see. That would be east. To the southeast of there.

DePue: Southeast of P'yongyang?

Bleuer: Yeah. P'yongyang. Compound Number Five. There was five compounds there.

DePue: When you got there, then, there were, what—hundreds? thousands?—of prisoners at that compound?

Bleuer: Yes. At just one compound that I was at, you know, they've got barbed wire all around this thing, and they've got a building there, center like, where they take you in and interrogate you. And then [unintelligible], and your cell, it depended on what you did. If you pissed them off or whatever, they'd put you in these, like a box, only there'd be bars over the top of a hole in the ground. That was your job. You cried for water; sometimes the guard would come up just to the bars...

DePue: This was if you were in solitary confinement?

Bleuer: Yeah.

DePue: Did you spend some time in solitary?

Bleuer: Um-hm. I... didn't tell him the things he wanted to hear, so he decided I had to go.

DePue: Was that during the initial interrogation?

Bleuer: Yeah.

DePue: Can you discuss a little bit about that first time you encountered other POWs, other than the four of you?

Bleuer: They were inside of this compound.

DePue: What were the kinds of things that you found out from the other POWs who had been there for a while?

Bleuer: You better do whatever they say and just do whatever, otherwise you're in for it. If you don't bow, if you don't do exactly what they said. The guards liked to have fun with the prisoners, so they'd take some of us and line us up against the barbed wire, and have a mock firing squad. Sometimes it was real. They killed them. They killed some GIs. So, you know, when they're pointing a gun at you and pulling the trigger, like I said, you die. You expect to die.

DePue: Were you in part of that lineup?

Bleuer: Yes. Once. I died. And then they laughed. They thought that was their sport. They were having fun with us.

DePue: Were there some prisoners there who had been there since the beginning of the war?

Bleuer: I don't know that I can answer that. I didn't get that close to all of them. You kind of stick around with the guys you were with, you know? Or you try to.

DePue: So you stuck close with the three other gentlemen who were captured with you?

Bleuer: Yeah. That's two of the guys that you took their names down. They were black.

DePue: Jasper Means and F. G. Dawson?

Bleuer: Yeah. They were black. They were both black.

DePue: How about the other gentleman's name?

Bleuer: Kasper was his last name, but I can't tell you...

DePue: And all four of you are just average infantrymen?

Bleuer: All of us. As the old first officer said, "You're a ground, pound, and gravel-agitating doggy." (laughs) He also said, "Whale shit on the bottom of the ocean is higher than you guys." (laughs)

DePue: By the time you're spending time in Camp Number Five, you're inclined to agree with him, aren't you?

Bleuer: Oh, God, yes.

DePue: What was the typical day in camp like for you in the compound?

Bleuer: Trying to figure out what they're going to do to you next. Miserable. Cold. Everybody's cold. Everybody's hungry. Some guys would push dirt in their mouth, get the hunger pangs down, because they're too hungry.

DePue: Are you getting some kind of food?

Bleuer: Yeah. They gave you some rice—we used to call it fish heads and rice—but I don't even know. Sometimes it's boiled rat, thrown in with the rice.

DePue: Did they cook it for you or did they expect —

Bleuer: Oh, they cooked it for you. You went through the line there, and you got the food in your hand, or whatever you could find to put it in.

DePue: For lack of a better term, what was your lodging like? Buildings that you were in?

Bleuer: They were, when you got to stay in them, they were that wooden building.

DePue: I assume no insulation.

Bleuer: No. Colder than hell.

DePue: Did they have furnace, or a heater, or —

Bleuer: No.

DePue: Stoves?

Bleuer: No.

DePue: So there's no heat in these buildings?

Bleuer: Only in their part.

DePue: In their, meaning the Chinese —

Bleuer: Yeah. The Chinese, where the officer who interrogated you, that was heated.

DePue: Well, so, this is in the dead of winter in North Korea. This is —

Bleuer: Colder than hell.

DePue: Way below freezing, I assume. Snow on the ground? How did you keep warm in the nights, then?

Bleuer: Just ... by huddling together. Trying to keep warm with each other's body heat. And we had some clothes. If you could find anything to put on you, over you, papers, newspaper, anything, you know.

DePue: How about water? Was there a clean water supply?

Bleuer: No. No, a lot of the guys got dysentery, and diarrhea, and...

DePue: I guess you weren't even able to boil the water you got, were you?

Bleuer: No. We didn't have anything that was issued to us. They took all that away from us. They even took the metal away from us. My mother gave me this.

DePue: It's a —

Bleuer: Blessed Mother. BVM.[Blessed Virgin Mary] She gave me this medal when I was about eighteen years old. So when I got over there, that's the first thing they take, is your rings and your medal. They take all your stuff.

DePue: Did you see any of the soldiers getting any kind of medical care??

Bleuer: Yeah, they had a place there. It's not a hospital, but they had a Chinese guy with a couple of —I guess they claimed they were doctors. One was a doctor.

DePue: Again, this is probably a miscarriage in using this term at all, but sanitation? Where would you go to relieve yourself?

Bleuer: The trench outside. We had to go out and crap in it. ...

DePue: You mentioned a lot of the soldiers had dysentery?

Bleuer: Yeah.

DePue: Did you get dysentery yourself?

Bleuer: No. I had diarrhea really bad, but you don't get enough to eat to have too much diarrhea.

DePue: What was your water source?

Bleuer: Well, we drank it. But they gave us water. Sometimes — in the beginning, it was fairly clean. But then it got worse as it was there for a while.

DePue: Now, Gene, you might be in a position here to disagree with this. I've read something about the treatment that the Chinese and the North Koreans were giving. What I have read is that by this time of the war, since the armistice negotiations had been going on for a year or more by the time you were captured, that the Chinese were a little bit more diligent about making sure that the prisoners actually survived, because they knew the day was going to come that they were going to be exchanged, that actually the treatment was better than during those first few months.

Bleuer: Well, you see that — I can't tell you what it was like before I got there, but I can only tell you what happened there. Like I said, the food they gave us, if you want to call it food. Crap, you know? Then there was some water there, but there was no place, no barracks if you're looking for something like that, with a bed or a cot or something. We didn't have things like that.

DePue: It would seem from what you're describing, people were just *barely* surviving.

Bleuer: Yeah. ... And they could care less. Whether you lived or you died, they don't give a damn, so.

DePue: Do you know of prisoners who died while you were there?

Bleuer: Oh, yes. Yes.

DePue: What would happen with them?

Bleuer: They'd take them out.

DePue: The Chinese would take them out, or —?

Bleuer: Yeah.

DePue: And bury them someplace?

Bleuer: Someplace. Well, and then this is the part where ... One day, I can't tell you when, but it was after I was there a while, five Russian officers came through, being led by the Chinese around. They came through and looked at us, and they looked at everybody there. Then they went into where the Chinese were at, and then after that, they left. And after they left, then they took some of the guys out of the compound. I wasn't one of them. But then they had, I guess, they said they had other GIs that they took. And they said that they took these — now *they* said they took —

DePue: The Chinese said?

Bleuer: The Chinese said the Russians took them back to Russia. The GIs.

DePue: Do you have any idea why they would have selected ones that they did?

Bleuer: Well, I think it depended on how good — whether you looked like you could work or not. I think it was slave labor.

DePue: Were there strictly Americans in this compound?

Bleuer: Strictly.

DePue: Were they all infantry? Were they all Army? Were there any Marines?

Bleuer: Oh, yeah. No… The Marines don't seem to surrender too much. And they don't seem to leave their buddy. There was some, but —

DePue: Were there any Air Force in the compound?

Bleuer: No, I didn't see any.

DePue: Okay.

Bleuer: It was doggies or… there was a few Marines.

DePue: The only reason I was asking about the Air Force is the Russians might have been interested in the pilots, because of their knowledge about flying and all. There had been stories about a lot of the Air Force pilots ending up in Russia.

Bleuer: Well, we never had any Air Force guys with us, no. Maybe they had them on another compound. You know, I can only speak for where I was.

DePue: Now, it sounds like —

Bleuer: Then we...

DePue: Go ahead.

Bleuer: Then we decided that we wanted to dig out. (laughs)

DePue: Well, can you tell me about that?

Bleuer: Well, we had a slit trench started. We were given the job to dig another potty hole, and so we used the shovel to start digging. We were going to dig underneath the wire, and escape. Try to escape. I was getting pretty weak at that point, too, and so we all were. We had diarrhea, and lousy food, and cold all the time. You're so weak, you're... So we started to dig, and that's the last thing I remember of this. It got black. It got so black. I couldn't see anything, and I couldn't breathe. And then I couldn't move. And those two guys I told you about, they dug me up. I guess I was there three days.

DePue: You were basically buried?

Bleuer: Buried alive.

DePue: So this was that tunnel that you were digging under the wire.

Bleuer: Yeah. It just caved in over me.

DePue: And you obviously blacked out when the tunnel fell on you?

Bleuer: Yeah. … I could breathe sand. And I (unintelligible)

DePue: Did you suffer some injuries because of that?

Bleuer: I don't — I don't think so. Because like I said, I blacked out. I don't remember anything after that, except that I can remember waking up in an evac tent. You know, hospital, on our side. I remember coming to. I think I was up walking around, but I don't —

DePue: You mean after this tunnel collapsed on you —

Bleuer: Yeah.

DePue: — and these two guys pulled you out of there, the next thing you remember is being in an *American* evacuation hospital?

Bleuer: Yes. Yes.

DePue: Do you have any idea how long after, that would have transpired?

Bleuer: No. No.

DePue: Okay. Did either Means or Dawson survive, then? Were they telling you about this afterwards?

Bleuer: Yeah. Means was. Jasper. He was telling me about it; he was there in the evac hospital with me at that point. I think that's when they got rid of the ones that were needing hospital, or medical care. They decided — maybe that's because of the

negotiations. They wanted to get rid of the prisoners, so they don't weaken. They can survive.

DePue: Well, to put that in the context, and I can understand why all of this is very fuzzy to you in terms of specific dates, but I think it was April twentieth through the twenty-sixth. There was what they called the Little Switch; the injured and sick were being exchanged on both sides. So from what you and I had talked about before, what makes sense, certainly with this story that you just told me here, is that the Chinese would have considered you to be injured, or certainly sick. Maybe it was psychologically sick. Maybe you were even in a coma at that time. Does it sound right to you that you would have been part of this exchange in April of 1953?

Bleuer: That probably is right. I remember Jasper telling me—in the evac hospital, he said, "Man, you ain't right in your head. You just, you lost it. You just ain't right. You were screaming and hollering." And I said, "I was?" "Yeah."

DePue: You didn't remember any of that?

Bleuer: Oh, I couldn't. No. He said, "You just weren't right, man." (laughs)

DePue: Was Jasper injured in some way?

Bleuer: Yeah. I guess when they caught us digging out, they gave him a bayonet in the belly, and he was hurt. So.

DePue: I want to talk a little bit more about the experiences that you do recall from prison camp, and specifically about some of the apparent mind games the Chinese were playing with the Americans there. Do you recall any classes or indoctrination sessions that they conducted?

Bleuer: Yeah.

DePue: What kind of things were they ...

Bleuer: I don't want to talk about it.

DePue: Okay.

Bleuer: It's one of the reasons I got in trouble.

DePue: Okay. (pause) Since you've already discussed being returned back to the American lines, can you discuss a little bit about what happened after you woke up in this evac hospital, after Jasper Means tells you what had happened up north in those days when you can't recall anymore? What happened after that?

Bleuer: Well, then the officer came in to interrogate both Jasper and I.

DePue: This was an American officer?

Bleuer: Yeah. Pardon me for saying so, it was a West Pointer.

DePue: (laughs) Okay.

Bleuer: I don't know where… You should have had that guy on the football team.

DePue: He was a big guy, was he?

Bleuer: Yeah. He says, "Well you know you shouldn't have surrendered." He was telling us stories about during the Civil — no, during the Revolutionary War. General Washington wouldn't allow his soldiers to surrender to the British. He says, "The Army does not allow you to surrender, and you're supposed to die where you stand, and you're not supposed to tell the enemy anything," you know. And the whole thing. And he's going on, what sounded like Douglas MacArthur's speech to me, but...

DePue: Were you being interrogated individually, or as a group?

Bleuer: Yeah. No.

DePue: What were you thinking?

Bleuer: Both of us were being interrogated together, because he wanted to find out what happened, what they were doing over there in the prison camps, I guess. And, like, even now, I'm not — I can't remember exactly everything that happened, you know, after that, but I do remember what I've told you so far. But, yeah, they wanted to. And of course I guess they got what they wanted, the Chinese. They got so many GIs that went over to the other side.

DePue: What you're referring to here is whether or not there would be forced repatriation, and the part that really amazes me is that that war went on for two years, because the Chinese and the Americans couldn't agree on that issue. Of course there were tens of thousands of North Koreans and Chinese that elected to stay in the south. What were you thinking? What was going on through your mind, then, when this officer — American officer — is sitting here and basically lambasting you for being a prisoner in the first place?

Bleuer: Oh, I swore at him. That's how I get in trouble all the time. I told him to go get fucked.

DePue: Not sure I can blame you at that point in time. Was it more his lecturing, or was he really, truly trying to find out what was going on in those camps?

Bleuer: I don't know. He was trying to tell us that we're cowards and shouldn't have surrendered. We already agreed to that. Why beat it to death? Leave it alone.

DePue: What was —

Bleuer: I — And — And they're worried — they were worried about the guys that swung over, and he wanted to know about that. And we wouldn't tell him. Neither one of us did.

DePue: Tell me a little bit about the medical care that you got, then, once you got into Americans' hands.

Bleuer: Good. Real good. They —

DePue: Was this in Japan?

Bleuer: No. This was in Korea. They, well, they did. They sent us on R&R, and we got to go over to Camp Drake, I think it was. We flew over there in a DC-3, I think it was. We got all the milk we wanted, and all the ice cream, and steaks, and everything else. And the good thing is about it, we ate so much that we threw it all up. (both laugh)

DePue: Well, yeah. After what you were living on, you couldn't handle any kind of food that was real food, I would think.

Bleuer: Sure tasted good going down, though.

DePue: I bet. Were you released from the hospital, then, fairly quickly?

Bleuer: Yeah. After, when I came back from R&R, they released me and sent me to the 936th Field Artillery, Battery B.

DePue: So you went *back* on the line?

Bleuer: Yeah. Yes. Unless you were wounded, you don't...

DePue: So this must have been like April or May of 1953.

Bleuer: Yeah. Something like that. Yeah, something like that.

DePue: Well, May, I would think.

Bleuer: Because when I left to go home, I left from the 936th Field, Battery B.

DePue: Do you recall, then, the day the armistice was signed? That was July twenty-seventh.

Bleuer: Is that right? Fifty-three?

DePue: Fifty-three. The rest of the prisoners would have been released starting in August of '53.

Bleuer: Okay. Okay. And when I started to go home, I had claustrophobia so bad that they put… I told the psychiatrist that was in Japan. I told the psychiatrist; I said, "I'm

not going to be able to go down with the troops in the hole. I won't make it. I have to sleep on the deck or something." And he said, "Oh, don't worry about it." This was in Japan. Right there. They put me on the USS Palau Aircraft Carrier. We occupied the sickbay on the Aircraft Carrier. And this is the — I kept that, because this is where the Captain, he was a real nice guy. He —

DePue: The ship's Captain?

Bleuer: Yeah. And they let me sleep on the hangar deck in a sleeping bag. I didn't have to go down in the hole. Onboard ship.

DePue: Where had you had this conversation with the psychiatrist, then? Was that in Korea?

Bleuer: In Japan.

DePue: In Japan.

Bleuer: No, that was in Japan. Because, see, the 936th, they don't need some guy who was going bonkers.

DePue: So did they send you back before the end of the war, then? Or not until after the end?

Bleuer: I think it was —

DePue: This is dated —

Bleuer: Close to it. Close to it.

DePue: This is dated the thirtieth September, 1953.

Bleuer: And that's when I went home.

DePue: Yeah.

Bleuer: Okay.

DePue: So did they send you from the 936th and then to Japan for a while, and that's when you had the chance to talk to the psychiatrist?

Bleuer: Yes. Yes.

DePue: Okay.

Bleuer: And the psychiatrist, he wouldn't let us go home, which is bad, but Jasper and Dawson were with me too. We were in Japan. We got to go over to PX and drink beer all the time. (laughs) Drowning our sorrows. I got the idea, I got to be an alcoholic when I got home.

DePue: Did you get any other interrogations by Americans, other than this first time with this officer? Were there other times that people would talk to you about your experiences?

Bleuer: No, just the psychiatrist. The doctor told me, "I think what you need to do is to sit down in a group here, where you can counsel with each other."

DePue: Talk through some of the experiences?

Bleuer: Yeah. And I said, "I don't really want to do that. Why would you want to talk about it?"

DePue: Did you get medically discharged after this, then?

Bleuer: No. No. When I got home, I don't go out. No, I didn't get medically discharged. Went to Stoneman, and from Stoneman, I went to Camp Carson, Colorado. And they had me there, I was a cadre there at Camp Carson for new recruits coming in. They weren't going to release me right away, you know. And I talked to the psychiatrist there, too.

DePue: Primarily about your claustrophobia, or —

Bleuer: Yeah. Yeah.

DePue: So were you discharged —

Bleuer: Well, the psychiatrist said this. You know, I think they went to West Point too. (laughs)

DePue: Uh-oh.

Bleuer: He says, "Well, now that you know what the problem is," he says, "Just get over it." I said, "Gee, I wish I had thought of that." (laughs)

DePue: Because it ought to be just that simple, huh?

Bleuer: I've always been a smartass, I guess (laughs)

DePue: When were you released from the Army, then? Was it within a few months after getting to Camp Carson?

Bleuer: No, it was right here, I think. This says State of Illinois.

DePue: "Transfer to the inactive Illinois National Guard. 28 November, 1953."

Bleuer: Yes. (laughs) You see, that's why I'm glad I saved these papers, because I had no way of —

DePue: Well, that's only fifty-four years past, now. It gives plenty of opportunity to forget about some of the details. Okay. So what happens after you're released? You come back to Illinois.

Bleuer: I came back home, and of course my wife, who wasn't too happy with me for leaving. I told you about when I kicked the window out. And then well, I went back to work at John Deere. They didn't have my job. I had to start at the beginning, and so. When I got my first paycheck, I think I didn't have enough — I had about forty cents left over after I had my first paycheck. I had a wife and child I was trying to support, and I thought, Well, huh. Well, I'm never going to do that. And so I was —

DePue: Whoa. Wait a minute here. Wait a minute here. I'm looking at the microphone, and it's down in your lap.

Bleuer: Oh, I'm sorry.

DePue: I don't know how much we would have lost there. Okay. Sorry about that, Gene. It might have been real low, but I hope that they still pick some of that up, even sitting in your lap. We're going to assume that it did, because I don't think that it's been that long.

Bleuer: So feeling sorry for — did you ever see that movie, ... where these three servicemen came back from World War II...

DePue: *The Young Lions*?

Bleuer: No, it's a — Dana Andrews is in it.

DePue: Oh. *Best Years of Our Lives*.

Bleuer: *Best Years of Our Lives*. I can remember Dana Andrews. I put myself just like Dana Andrews, because he was a soda jerk and when he came back home, he got to be a soda jerk again. (laughs) And he finally ends up being a junk dealer on B-29.

DePue: Yeah. I remember the ending of that movie.

Bleuer: So, I was thinking, Just like me. (laughs) So I'm driving around in the car feeling sorry for myself. I drove by St. Ambrose College over there, and I saw a friend of mine. He was in the Service. I stopped at St. Ambrose College, and he said, "Why don't you come on over here and go to school with us? Because you've got the GI Bill. Why don't you do that?" I said, "By God, I think you're right." Went in, talked to the registrar, and she said, "Yeah. We've got a lot of GIs that are going to school here." And I thought, Well, hey. If I wanted to live on forty cents for the rest of my life... (laughs) Why, hey. I think I'm going to try and better myself. So went in, took their exam, passed the entrance exam. I got into college. We worked well together, because we were GIs. You know, we're used to doing this. After we get done with — I took an engineering course. I got it. And a math degree. And I got

an engineering degree. After we got done with our classes, we'd all go in an empty room and we'd study together. We helped work our problems together. We helped each other. I can remember the sarcastic thing that the school paper said. The announcement was, "The campus has not been invaded by a bunch of hobos and bums. (laughs) These are ex-GIs." (laughs) You know, of course most of the kids going there were, their fathers were dentists and doctors, and so on. (laughs) And so, hey, we developed another real kinship together. I've got to say this about my country. Yeah, I went through a few things, but my country got me an education. I built a house on the GI Bill. I got GI insurance. And thanks to Harry Truman and that GI Bill, my country has taken care of me after I got home.

DePue: What was your major in college?

Bleuer: I started off as pre-engineering. Then I liked math so well that I continued with math. And I got a math degree and a physics engineering degree, because they didn't have the physics science type engineering degree. So in my physics class, I designed a capacitor which studies the resistance across thermo-conductors. Soldered semiconductors, the resistance across that. And then the capacitors across that. And I designed this tool. So they sent me to the University of Iowa to give a class on that. Well, while I was there, General Motors sent some people down from General Motors Institute of Technology, and they hired me. So I got to go to General Motors Institute of Technology to get an engineering degree. (laughs) I got to work for them afterwards. And while I was going to work there, I decided I want to go back to college. And so I went to graduate school at Purdue. I got a fellowship there so I could teach undergrad math. And my wife decided that I was trying to become a professional student, so that was it. (laughs)

DePue: So you got divorced then, I take it?

Bleuer: Yeah. She divorced me.

DePue: What year was that?

Bleuer: (sighs) ... I don't know, '70, '69.

DePue: 1969?

Bleuer: Yeah. I think it was.

DePue: Okay. So that was a long time after you came back from Korea, though.

Bleuer: Yeah, but I didn't start the college until 1960. 1960, '61.

DePue: Well, I'm going to back up just a little bit, because I think you mentioned that you found out that you had a baby while you were in captivity.

Bleuer: Oh! Yeah, okay.

DePue: Can you talk a little bit about that? So you had *some* contact with the outside world.

Bleuer: Well, the Chinese came in and said that they wanted to know who I was, and to go over to where they had a radio, over there where the officers were, the Chinese officers. He said, "Are you Gene Bleuer?" I said, "Yes, I am." And he said, "You had a baby." ... And I said, "Gee, that's, that's great. Do you know what kind it was?" He says, "Like an American! There's only two kinds." I said, "Well, do you know which kind it was?" "No," he said. "I'm not sure."

DePue: Was this the same guy who had gone to Stanford?

Bleuer: No. But he spoke American.

DePue: Okay.

Bleuer: No, that guy from Stanford, you didn't want to mess with him. (laughs)

DePue: You were happy to only have seen him that one time?

Bleuer: That's one guy I'd like to…

DePue: Yeah.

Bleuer: (laughs) Never mind.

DePue: Yeah. Did you get any mail from the United States

Bleuer: Yeah.

DePue: Were you able to send mail out?

Bleuer: Well, yes. We were able to send some out. The Red Cross came through. I forgot to tell you that. But the Red Cross did come through, and they took some of our letters, and they brought some in. That was the Red Cross, and I think she said she was from Sweden, person.

DePue: So it was a Caucasian who came through.

Bleuer: Yeah. Caucasian. Yeah.

DePue: Did that happen just one time?

Bleuer: Yeah, maybe... maybe that happened again. It's one time I remember it for sure, but — especially the time about my daughter. But they didn't even know (laughs) whether it was a girl or a boy. Said there was only two kinds. Geez, I couldn't have figured that out myself. (laughs)

DePue: When the Red Cross came, did you get any Red Cross packages?

Bleuer: Yeah, but they took them as soon as they left.

DePue: If you're willing to, Gene, I'd like to have you talk a little bit more about adjusting to life in the United States after you came back.

Bleuer: Okay. I told you that I did it the easy way. I went to college, and — But I had a tough time as far as drinking. I had an alcoholic problem.

DePue: Did you have problems sleeping?

Bleuer: Yes. Yes. Well, I told you about that time I kicked out the window. Egads, I couldn't hardly sleep last night, just thinking about I was going to have to relive this.

DePue: Yeah. Sorry about that.

Bleuer: Well, I — that's not your fault. It's mine. (laughs) You know, if you're a strong person, you get over those things, but sometimes when you're a little emotional, it's hard for us to get over them.

DePue: Now, you mentioned your first wife divorced you. Did she have difficulty trying to understand what you were going through, in terms of —

Bleuer: Yeah.

DePue: — your wartime experiences?

Bleuer: Sure. Sure.

DePue: Were you able to talk to her about it, or did you want to talk to her about it?

Bleuer: Tried to, but it wasn't — no way. She didn't want any part of it.

DePue: She didn't want to hear the stories?

Bleuer: No. She'd, "We've heard all about World War II. We don't need to listen to that other stuff." (laughs)

DePue: What were your thoughts about the American public in general? Unlike World War II, the Korean veterans came back, and from what I can gather, were kind of ignored by the American —

Bleuer: We were. Completely. Nobody wanted to talk to us. And they didn't want to hear about it. "We're tired of hearing about World War II. You guys, that was just a police action anyway. So the cops arrested you," they used to always say. "You guys were the robbers. Is that it?"

DePue: That old story about the ones who ended up going up overseas, or the ones where the judge gave them a choice: You can either go into the Army or go to jail?

Bleuer: (laughs) Yeah.

DePue: So I take it that you resented all of that.

Bleuer: Yeah, very much so. And then one of the guys that used to work with me up at John Deere said, "Oh, you play soldiers got caught over there, huh?" In Korea, you know.

DePue: Play soldiers because you were in the National Guard?

Bleuer: Yeah. And he was a draft dodger, of course. He never ever went to service. You get nice comments like that. Yeah, so we were play soldiers because we were in the National Guard. I'd sure like to have some of those guys with me when we were playing soldier over there.

DePue: Again, you don't have to answer this if you don't want to — was alcohol part of the reason for the divorce?

Bleuer: Yeah. Yeah. I have a habit of losing my temper when I get into drinking. I still drink now, but I just started recently. I drink maybe *a* beer, one or two beers a day. That's about it. Not even that. Sometimes I just drink every other day. I'm taking the bull by the horns and I've gotten rid of the problem. I know. You know, like the psychiatrist said, "You know what the problem is. Get over it." (laughs)

DePue: It's just that simple, huh?

Bleuer: Thanks, Doc. I wish I would have thought of that.

DePue: I know you got married again.

Bleuer: Yes.

DePue: After that first divorce.

Bleuer: Um-hm.

DePue: Are you willing to talk about your second wife, then?

Bleuer: Just she was a great gal. I met her in the hospital, and her and I started dating. We got together, and I married her.

DePue: What was her name?

Bleuer: Joan E., of course, Bleuer. You want her maiden name?

DePue: Her maiden name, yeah.

Bleuer: Anderson. And the only problem there was that she was a born Lutheran and I'm a born, raised Catholic. But we didn't have any problem with that. I went to her

church with her, and she went to my church with me, and, you know, that wasn't really a problem. But she helped get me over my drinking problem, and she helped me become a better man.

DePue: So she knew you had a drinking problem when you got married?

Bleuer: Yeah. She knew what I was.

DePue: She was willing to help you work through some of these issues from the war as well?

Bleuer: Yes. Oh, she listened to everything. She even, we went to these meetings, why, she would — she even became secretary of the — see, I was —

DePue: Meetings, you mean the Korean War Association? Or Ex-POWs Association?

Bleuer: Ex-POW Association. She was secretary of that. See, I was a Commander of this. Probably says on there. Yeah. Western Illinois. I was Chapter Commander.

DePue: So, Western Illinois Chapter of the American Ex-Prisoners of War Association.

Bleuer: Now, that's what I was Commander of. And —

DePue: For Western Illinois Chapter.

Bleuer: Yeah. And this, when I was the Commander, why, she was the secretary of that. So she worked, we went to all the different functions that we had.

DePue: When did you start getting involved with them? Was this many, many years after the war, then?

Bleuer: Yeah. Yeah, it was. It was after I got out of college. It was... DePue: Early eighties? Seventies?

Bleuer: Yeah, I think so. It had to be in the late seventies, early eighties. They were having some functions, and I asked… Oh. I got involved in them when Welcome Home Vietnam Veterans. Good friend of mine was a Vietnam Veteran, Larry Chapats. I can't think of all their names, but — Now I've forgot, but they wanted to know whether I would represent the Korean War Prisoners of War. And I said sure. So they said, "We're having a Welcome Home parade." We had Lane Evans, and all the politicians came, and all that. So I said, "Sure, I'll gladly." And so they even gave me and Joan a citation for that. But they loved us. So after that, the Western Illinois Chapter said, "Well, why don't you come and join our outfit? We're World War II." And I said, "Well, okay, I will." So I did. This was for World War II. And of course I've been a life member. This I —

DePue: The Korean War Veterans' Association.

Bleuer: Okay. I went, I joined that when? 1995? when I took Joan, in a wheelchair as she was dying; she had a congestive heart failure. She had five different heart attacks. So I put her in a wheelchair, and I took her to the 1995 Korean War Memorial in Washington, DC, and that's where I got signed up. I ran into a buddy of mine from the Fifth Regimental Combat Team, Rudy Zamora. In fact, we even write each other yet. He lives in Selma, CA. And he came here a couple times to see me, and I wanted to go see him, too. I haven't got around to it yet. Looks like I better hurry. But in any event, he — what did I start to say? So I joined the Western Illinois Chapter, and then I went up through the chairs, and I finally got to be Chapter Commander.

DePue: Has it helped, meeting and talking to these other ex-POWs?

Bleuer: Absolutely. Absolutely. In fact, not just the ex- — This group that I'm with —

DePue: This Korean War group in town here?

Bleuer: Yeah. For breakfast. They're great. We're all great.

DePue: I've met several of these —

Bleuer: Even the swabbies (Navy) and the jarheads.(Marines)

DePue: I've met several of these guys at breakfast at the Maid Rite—

Bleuer: Yes.

DePue: — in Rock Island. It seems like a great group. But it's come rather late in your life, hasn't it?

Bleuer: Yes, it has. But, and I really found, talking to them, you just...

DePue: And it's been forty or fifty years removed that you finally found that?

Bleuer: Yeah. In fact, Bob Pitts and I are good friends. He was a Chapter Commander for that too, Bob was. Then he was in charge of the state Korean War deal. And I think he's working on that museum.

DePue: He's working on the Korean War Museum down in Springfield. You probably won't be surprised that he was the one who recommended I talk with you as well.

Bleuer: Yeah. That would not surprise me at all, because that's my buddy. We've gone through a lot together, you know? And so we just cry on each other's shoulder. In fact, we're the only ones that listen. We listen to each other. (laughs) Nobody else wants to hear it. (laughs)

DePue: Well, it's been wonderful for me to have the experience to listen to it, and now other people will have that experience as well. People who truly want to

understand. Part of the tragedy, from what I can tell from my perspective, is starting with that West Point officer who briefed you, who interrogated you, people are judging you rather than just trying to understand.

Bleuer: Right. Well, I always felt this is the way that you're trained at West Point. You're trained to think that way, that you don't — you're supposed to be honor, and — what is the Navy always playing?

DePue: Duty, honor, country?

Bleuer: Yeah. (laughs) And for you to surrender –well, you know, that was you're giving up. Trust me, if I had to do it all over again, I would have surrendered again.

DePue: Well, it didn't look like you had any kind of an option.

Bleuer: (laughs) No, I didn't. Well, yeah. There was the other option. I could have died.

DePue: Yeah. That's not much of an option.

Bleuer: Sometimes that's not a good option. To a survivor, it's not a good option. I'm glad I lived through it, but I definitely, to this day, I can still remember the look in their eyes when I was there. The look in all our eyes, the hopelessness that we had, and the despair, and how sad that was. And I can remember the guys in my platoon. (sighs) I did a lousy job of leading them, you know. But then they did a lousy job of leading me, too, so... (laughs)

DePue: Yeah. Well, I could tell you that the things that you're supposed to learn at West Point: if you're a Lieutenant, you don't always let the soldiers go on patrols by themselves. You're supposed to be out there leading it.

Bleuer: That sounds like that would have been a good idea. Then we'd had a Lieutenant over there with us in prison camp. Then what?

DePue: Yeah. There were certainly plenty of officers in the prison camps. I don't know whether they were in your prison camp or not.

Bleuer: Yeah. No, I didn't see any, but that doesn't mean there wasn't any.

DePue: Well, they might have sent them to different camps.

Bleuer: I don't think they'd put them with the regular men, with the doggies.

DePue: One of the things I have heard about the North Koreans especially, but I think the Chinese also, is that they insisted that there was no rank. That there was no rank in the prison camps.

Bleuer: Oh, you mean —

DePue: Among the prisoners.

Bleuer: Oh! No. No. No rank? You mean no Sergeants?

DePue: That they insisted that—this is what I've read, especially in the early months or year of the war—they insisted that if you were an officer, you took the officer's rank off, and they said that the soldiers should treat the officers just like anybody else.

Bleuer: Oh.

DePue: Part of what was so disorienting about being a prisoner was that there was no structure, there was no hierarchy. That was just part of what they had in mind. Does that sound right in your experience?

Bleuer: Not that I know of. I don't know that there was any officers there. Now, whether they said that to any officers, they might. They may have.

DePue: Do you recall any of the people in the prison camp, any of the prisoners saying, "I'm the senior person here. I need to take charge."? Or was it pretty much everybody on their own?

Bleuer: Just those guys— I don't want to talk about that.

DePue: Okay. ... You've been through some very tough things in your life, especially in the war itself. A lot of years have passed since then. Do you think the Korean War was worth it?

Bleuer: Yes. At the time I sure didn't, but when I listen to President Clinton and President Lee, I think it was, at the Korean War Memorial, and I was within twenty feet of them.

DePue: You were there for the dedication?

Bleuer: Oh, yeah. I took Joan in a wheelchair.

DePue: Okay. So that was at the dedication ceremony?

Bleuer: Yeah. And I even got to go through the White House, and Joan got to pet Socks. [the Clintons' cat] (laughs) Joan thought that was the greatest thing. And, you know, I know Clinton was a 4F, or draft dodger, or whatever, but hey. He was, to me, he treated us well. I like Clinton. You know, he didn't say anything. He was very thankful for what we had done, told us. And President Lee said thanks to us, we stopped the spread of Communism, and his country is now a democracy. And that his country is probably one of the, I don't know, six, seven largest producing countries in the world, or something.

DePue: It's an incredibly vibrant country now, compared to North Korea, which is in —

Bleuer: Did you ever see all those medals? The President of Korea came over to Chicago, up to one of the big theaters up there, and they had all the Korean War veterans come up there.

DePue: Wow.

Bleuer: You didn't know about that?

DePue: No.

Bleuer: Yeah! And they gave us medals, and medallions. ...

DePue: And there it is! And that meant a lot to you?

Bleuer: Well, yeah. Yeah, it did. Because I lived with those people, and fought with them there, for them. And yeah. Yeah. The Korean people were — yeah, we think a lot of the Korean — I do. I do think a lot of the Korean people. I think they suffered with us, you know. That fighting went up and down that peninsula about three times, destroying everything they had, you know, and those people were still able to rise out of the rubble and rebuild Korea.

DePue: So what do you think about the Chinese, your Chinese captors? Are you willing to talk about that at all?

Bleuer: No.

DePue: Okay.

Bleuer: Chinese captors?

DePue: The Chinese. Your captors.

Bleuer: No. I hate them. I don't like them. And I never will.

DePue: Let me ask you this. Does it bother you that Korea is the forgotten war, that we know so little about it?

Bleuer: Well, we're used to it now. We don't expect from anybody. Thanks to people like you, probably somebody's going to read or know something about it, but other than that, people are… I know Bob Pitts, and Ron Sears, and those guys, they had me to do a Tell America. We went over to Dedmore(?) High School, and Assumption High School. We started to tell all the kids about. You know what those kids know about the Korean War? You could put in your … (laughs)

DePue: Probably it would be about a footnote's worth.

Bleuer: You know, you get all done talking over there, and just like this one girl, she said, "Where is Korea, anyway?" (laughs)

DePue: Well, Gene, in 1950 when you heard that the North Koreans had invaded the South, did you know where Korea was?

Bleuer: No, I didn't. But what I'm saying is you beat your gums off, thinking you're really enlightening them, and they don't know anything about it. (laughs)

DePue: Well, if there was something that you could convey to the American public, what would you want the Americans to know about your involvement in Korea, about the Korean War?

Bleuer: I would like to tell the Americans that when you want to bring back these guys from Iraq and Afghanistan, do not in any way disgrace or dishonor the people that are dead, that died in that war, or them. It's not their fault because they're there, and don't start blaming them, like I'm hearing. You know, people saying, "Well, we got to get those guys out of Iraq. They're over there, blah, blah, blah," you know. Hey. They're not there. If you want to get those guys out of Iraq, then just make sure you don't disgrace them in any way, like we did with Vietnam, you know? That's… I've got a bellyful of that Vietnam stuff.

DePue: Well, I was going to ask you about that. About how we treated the Vietnam veterans.

Bleuer: Oh, it's terrible. Terrible. And that's why I joined arms with them when they asked me to. We went through the same thing, guys. My daughter, I almost had to disown her. She started — she was going to march in a parade against the Vietnam War and against the Vietnam Veterans. And I said, "You ever do that, you're never coming to my house again, and I'm disowning you."

DePue: Did she understand why you felt that way?

Bleuer: Yeah. I told her that. I said, "You—" I don't know. I don't think she really understood, but she knows that her father would blow his mind if she did that. (laughs)

DePue: Okay. Here's your big chance, then, Gene. What advice or wisdom would you pass on to future generations?

(pause)

Bleuer: I would say that this is the greatest country on this earth, and that it's worth fighting for, it's worth just to protect it, and do what you have to do in order to make sure that you're part of that, and not feel like I did, not wanting to go. You should really. It's your duty as a citizen of this country to protect it, and to protect the people, the American people. If this is your country and worth fighting for, you've got to remember how the settlers were when they first came here, how they fought against the English. And they gained this country. I think what you've got to do is, whether you're a man or a woman, and they decide to have a draft again or whatever it

takes, you know, then do it. Because don't call yourself an American if you're not willing to fight for it.

DePue: Well, considering everything that you've sacrificed in your life, and what you've gone through, and that you stood up and you made that decision, then that means an awful lot. Any final comments for us, Gene?

Bleuer: No. Just remember these people when they come back from Iraq and Iran, or Afghanistan. Be protective of them and help them. They're going to need some help getting over this, because they've gone through an ordeal, a thing that nobody here, if you've never been in the Service and you just aren't used to it, and you don't know what they've gone through. Try to understand. And you're going to have to continue the GI Bill, continue aid for them, continue medical support for them, and if you want to find out where to get the money, just cut out all these Senate and Republican increases that you're giving all the House of Representatives and all these people. Cut out their increases.

DePue: Cut out the politicians' pay raises?

Bleuer: Pay raises, yeah. Give it to the veterans.

DePue: Well, with that, Gene, let me tell you how much I appreciate, how much I'm honored, that you are wiling to sit down and talk to me about this. Remarkable life, I think. Certainly a lot of pain. I'm amazed at your candor and your willingness to talk about it, and I admire you very much for that.

Bleuer: Well, thank you.

DePue: So, thank you.

Bleuer: Thank you.