Interview with Arthur Betts

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DePue: Today is Monday, October 27, 2008. My name is Mark DePue; I'm the Director of Oral History at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. Today I'm in Chicago near Midway Airport to talk with Arthur Betts. Good morning, Arthur.

Betts: Good morning!

DePue: I should say good afternoon since it's—

Betts: Good afternoon. I'll accept that.

DePue: Arthur is a World War II veteran. It's a special treat for me to talk with you today, Arthur, since I know that maybe the highlight of your experience in World War II was being one of the 2221 soldiers who fought in integrated infantry units after the Battle of the Bulge, something that I don't think very many people—

Betts: Not after, but during the Battle of the Bulge.

DePue: During! (laughter) That's an important point, I know! I don't think many people even are aware that happened.

Betts: No, not a lot of people would know because some of the American Army had a lot of units on different fronts that didn't realize that was going on. That was only between President Truman and General Eisenhower decided on this in the Proclamation [President Truman signed Executive Order 9981 in 1948 which integrated the military.], so it's a lot of units wasn't aware of it at the time.

DePue: Well, we're going to take about twenty or so years back because I want you to tell us first your birthday. When were you born?

Betts: Four twenty-nine eighteen.

DePue: You were born in 1918?

Betts: Nineteen eighteen. I'll be ninety-one on my next birthday. On my next birthday I'll be ninety-one years old.

DePue: Well, you're doing extremely well! 1918!

Betts: I'm hanging tough.

DePue: And you're going to be around for a lot longer, right?

Betts: No, I'll take it one day at a time!

DePue: (laughter) That's smart! Where were you born?

Betts: In a little rural town called Lexa, L-e-x-a, Arkansas.

DePue: Okay. Where did you grow up, then?

Betts: Well, I actually grew up in Chicago in, I would say, suburban Chicago, East Chicago, in Chicago, Indiana, and Chicago. It was only about twenty miles from here in Chicago, Illinois. It's right across the state line.

DePue: When did you move up to this area?

Betts: Well, I moved, I guess, around about 1930, '31.

DePue: Okay, so you were old enough to remember that move.

Betts: No, not from the South. No, I get two different…when I moved from Lexington, from the South, my parents brought me as a baby to the Chicago area. I would only be about three or four years old, something like that, you know.

DePue: What brought your family here, then?

Betts: Well, I guess the desire they had for employment. They figured opportunity and so forth for a job and everything. In fact, they actually came off a farm, and by coming here they figured they could get a more industrial job, rather than farming, you know, because my father was a farmer.

DePue: Okay. What kind of a farmer?

Betts: Well, I guess agricultural farmer, you know.

DePue: Was it cotton or rice or corn?

Betts: I guess mostly a cotton farmer.

DePue: Okay. What did he do once he got to this area?

Betts: He was employed by a steel company. He went with the steel company, which he retired from. Yeah, he worked for the Youngstowns. She did, too, probably.

DePue: Youngstown?

Betts: Yeah.

DePue: Okay, was that in Indiana or in Illinois?

Betts: That was in Indiana, East Chicago, Indiana, yeah, just east of Chicago, Illinois. It's across on the state line. They're both on Lake Michigan, you know, Chicago. Indiana is small. [along the lake]

[DePue: Okay. Do you remember much about growing up during the Depression, then?

Betts: Oh, yeah.

DePue: Well, can you tell me about what it was like to grow up in the Depression in Chicago?

Betts: It was a tough life, but we adapted to it, the pressure. You had to just deal with the Depression, with the bread lines, soup line, things like that. I know all about that. Then they started a program for the youngsters who didn't have jobs. President Franklin Roosevelt started what they called a CCC Brigade, Civilian Conservation Corps, and we had that. Of course, all the family men, they had what you call the WPA, which meant Works Progress Administration, which did building up the infrastructure of the cities and so forth, you know, parks, airports, streets.

DePue: Was your father able to keep his job during the Depression?

Betts: No, he had his layoffs and things like that. No...

DePue: Well, how did he manage to put food on the table during the Depression, then?

Betts: Well, a lot of that food from the Depression—you would get assistance sometimes from the city, state—and all that, assistance to go along with, which the meager amount earned is what you had. Yeah, that's where that WPA came in. When other private jobs went down, then the government and state started a WPA, and they would give you a meager salary, twenty-seven dollars every couple weeks, enough to keep your family, you know, bread on the table.

DePue: Where were you living at that time? Was it in Chicago then?

Betts: I was in Chicago already, yeah.

DePue: Okay, and your father's name?

Betts: Samuel. My father's name is Samuel Betts.

DePue: And how about your mother? What was her name?

Betts: Her name Ophelia, O-p-h-e-l-i-a.

DePue: Okay. Did she work during the Depression?

Betts: Once in a while she did like service work, you know, day work, once in a while.

DePue: Domestic work?

Betts: Domestic work, yeah, occasionally. It was to supplement the family with what we had coming in.

DePue: Did you live in a segregated neighborhood?

Betts: Yeah. Back then mostly the neighborhoods were segregated, although some of the schools, most of the schools were segregated, too, but that's how life was then.

DePue: Do you remember the first time you realized that you were a minority in the United States?

Betts: Yeah. We knew we were the minority, yeah.

DePue: Are there any particular stories that stick out in your mind, though, that emphasize that?

Betts: Yeah, I knew I was a minority because of our daily lives; it was different. We realized then, that opportunities and things were different. They were different for you then, and so it was very open. Everything was very open then, in a sense. That seemed to be accepted pattern of living back then.

DePue: Where did you go to high school, or did you?

Betts: Oh yeah, I started high school out of East Chicago, Indiana, yeah. Then a couple years later when my family moved to Chicago and crossed the state line, I finished up here on the Illinois side. I started on the Indiana side.

DePue: Now, if my math is correct, this would have been about 1936 or '37 that you finished high school, then?

Betts: Thirty-six. You're a pretty good mathematician! Actually, it was '36 when I came out.

DePue: Okay. What did you want to do, when you graduated from high school, with your life?

Betts: In '36... I think I don't remember if I wanted to go into law enforcement or not in '36. Yeah, I could've wanted maybe to go into law enforcement, but I just didn't get to. I never did follow through on it.

DePue: What did you do when you graduated?

Betts: At that time...

DePue: Those are still very tough economic times.

Betts: Yeah, that was still the Depression going on. There was five children in my family, and I had to figure out, if I didn't have the fund to go to college, pick up a job to help supplement my family and a couple of my younger brothers and sisters, you know. In, at that time, '36 they still had these public projects going on, the WPA and CCC for younger men who didn't have a job, and I joined the CCC.

DePue: You joined the CCC? Wonderful! What projects did you work on for the CCC?

Betts: CCC was mostly building roads. We upgraded roads in farms, building fence for the farmers and so forth around this area. We did that. They paid you one dollar a day, you know, thirty dollars a month, and twenty-five dollars of that money actually came home to your family. At the end of the month we only got five dollars across the table just for your personal items and things like that.

DePue: That's not even enough money to get in trouble, is it?

Betts: (laughter) No! That's all you got. The rest of the money, twenty-five dollars, came home to your family.

DePue: Now, in the CCC did you get room and board?

Betts: Yeah. The CCC was set up on the military style. You stayed in barracks, you know. You got your uniform, food and clothing, all that. Yeah, that's how it was.

DePue: Did you work around this area? Were you pretty close to Chicago?

Betts: No, I wasn't close to Chicago. They'll send you a hundred miles or a couple hundred miles from Chicago, although I was stationed in Illinois. At first they were sending the CCC boys out of the state. In fact, I had a brother who had joined an older brother in CCC from Indiana; they had sent him all the way to California on a CCC job and later on he'd stay started there in CCC, conjunction with the government, you know. Most of them stayed there on CCC.

DePue: Did you enjoy your experience with the CCC?

Betts: Wasn't so much enjoyment... Well, I enjoyed it in the way that I feel I was doing something for my family; I was helping out, doing something. In other words, I was a man; I mean, even though I was a boy in age, it made me be a man in stature because of what I was doing to help my family out.

DePue: I'm going to assume that when you were in the CCC you were working side by side with whites, as well.

Betts: No, that was all segregated. All your CCC camps were segregated, too. They were segregated. The whole military, everything in this country during that time were segregated. You go back to before World War I, the military has always been segregated in this country.

DePue: Was it the military, though, that was running the camps?

Betts: No, they had some in the reserve, military officers, who ran the camps. They were military men, yeah. They ran it in a military style, and they were all from the officers in the reserve.

DePue: Were they white officers?

Betts: They were white officers, yeah. They were white officers at the time. In fact, you know in World War I, what a lot of people don't realize, going back to the 369th Regiment out of Harlem, New York [Harlem Hell-Fighters], even though they were American citizens, they were not allowed to fight under the American flag. See, when they were sent overseas to France, they had to fight under the tri-color of France. France asked for them; they needed men because they had been invaded by Germany and so forth. They were in bad shape, so they asked the United States for the 369th; they had to fight all during the war with the 369th, even though it was an American [regiment]. After the war, they were such brave soldiers and good fighters—they never lost any land or anything—they received the highest military award from the French government, the Croix de Guerre. To add insult to injury, after World War I when those who survived and returned to the United States, they were even given a ticker-tape parade up from Broadway back up to Harlem. They couldn't even fight under the American flag in the World War II, and that continued in World War II, Spanish-American War. You had buffalo soldiers, which was all black, and they were segregated. In World War II they were segregated. Even though they were housed on the same base as white soldiers they shared separate quarters and everything, right on the same base.

DePue: How would you describe the way the white officers treated the blacks that were in your CCC organization?

Betts: They treated, I guess, according to the situation rules and so forth of the CCC at that time. That wasn't a problem, no.

DePue: The unit that you're talking about—

Betts: Yeah, white CCC. During that time there was a white CCC along with the black CCC, but they were all, Uh huh, yeah.

DePue: Yeah. The units you were discussing earlier, I think the nickname for them was the Harlem Hell-Fighters, because they had a heck of a reputation.

Betts: We did have the Harlem Hell-Fighters, yeah. Harlem Hell-Fighters. Some referred to them as the Men of Bronze.

DePue: Well, I know there's a unit right here in Chicago, the 370th Infantry Regiment, that was part of the old 8th Illinois. That was an all black unit, and they—

Betts: That was all black, down at Thirty-fifth Street on the South Side on the hill, men of bronze. Yeah, in fact, their building where they used to train at, the old National Guard Armory, used to stay there for years before they did it. We always wondered why they never demolished it. Finally in the last two or three years they finally made sort of a ROTC building out of it or something.

DePue: Is that the Bronzeville Armory that you're talking about?

Betts: That's the Bronzeville Armory they made out of it. See, they had a few white men who they do bus in that area. They come on a bus and they train; stay, you know, at Bronzeville Armory.

DePue: During the Depression you're working in the CCC. I'm sure that they're working you hard. Were you able to watch what was going on in Europe at the time, to see the war clouds building over in Europe?

Betts: Oh, yeah. In fact, I was in the service while the war was going on in Europe. In fact, I was in service before Pearl Harbor, almost a year before Pearl Harbor. I went in the regular military. I went in in March of 1941, and Pearl Harbor wasn't 'til December 7 of the same year.

DePue: What caused you to go into the military in March of '41?

Betts: They drafted men to go into the service. I was a young man of eighteen, nineteen, twenty or whatever, and I figured it was a matter of time before they were ever getting around to me. So I decided, well, after being in the CCC for a year, something like that, just more like a challenge to see what it was like, so I volunteered to go in.

DePue: So you enlisted in the Army.

Betts: I enlisted, yeah.

DePue: Okay, and it should be pointed out here: I know it was late 1940 when they established the draft because the administration saw the war clouds building. What branch in the Army did you go into?

Betts: Engineer.

DePue: Okay. Were you trained as a combat engineer?

Betts: No, as a regular engineer, wasn't a combat.

DePue: Construction engineer, then.

Betts: Yeah.

DePue: Why did you choose construction engineer?

Betts: No. What happened was, they'll assign you to wherever they need you.

DePue: Okay, so you didn't have much choice in the matter.

Betts: No, we had no choice in the matter at all. I didn't request it. I wasn't that familiar with the military, so I didn't request no particular branch.

DePue: Okay. Were you happy to end up in the engineers?

Betts: To me, it was a challenge. I'm the one that did it. I'm the one that really enlisted in it, so I guess at that time I was satisfied with the situation.

DePue: Where did you receive your basic training?

Betts: At Fort Custer, Michigan. That's outside of Battle Creek, Michigan.

DePue: Were your drill instructors blacks or were they white?

Betts: No, all of your officers at the time, they were all white.

DePue: And your NCOs, the sergeants that were trained?

Betts: No, your non-commissioned officers, they were black.

DePue: Okay. Well, if you're like most soldiers at that time, most of your exposure overwhelmingly in basic training is with the sergeants in charge of your training, so the sergeants in charge of your training were blacks?

Betts: They're all blacks, yeah.

DePue: Anything stick in your mind about that training?

Betts: No. It was really good training. In fact, in Custer there's only two black outfits up there. You mentioned the 178th_Field Artillery of the old8th Regiment. They were stationed up there along with my unit and 94th engineers, so we were the only two black units in Custer at that time, in 1941. We were the only two units.

DePue: I would guess that after being in the CCC for a year or two you were in darn good shape.

Betts: Yeah, I mean in CCC I just moved right over. It was easy. It wasn't a hard transition at all, yeah.

DePue: Okay. Where were you on December 7, 1941?

Betts: December seventh? Oh, I was in Custer then.

DePue: Okay. Can you describe your reaction or what you remember about December seventh?

Betts: Not really, no more than the world news then was the attack on Pearl Harbor. I knew then, uh huh, and later on then, it was Franklin Roosevelt, declared war on Japan first. Later they declared war on Germany and Italy because Germany, Italy, and Japan were called the Axis powers. They were all allied against the western power of England, France, United States on one side, then you had the Axis powers on the other side. I remember that very well.

DePue: How did your parents feel about your being in the Army as early as 1941, knowing that you'd be one of the first to go?

Betts: Yeah, I guess they accepted that, because you were already in the small pay in the Army, pay by being in the service. I received a pay, you know, which had a lot of it sent back home and would help the family out financially that way. Whatever it was, you receive that, and you know it was sent back to your family.

DePue: Can you tell me then, after your time at Fort Custer, where did you go?

Betts: I spent a year, a year and a half, two years integrated at Custer. I went on to maneuvers while I was at Custer, training on the Louisiana Maneuvers, attended the Louisiana Maneuvers. I was on the Tennessee Maneuvers, too, I guess.

DePue: Well, the Louisiana Maneuvers, the one I've always heard about so much—

Betts: Yeah, Louisiana Maneuvers. That's when they had the riot when the Louisiana Maneuvers were going through Little Rock, Arkansas. We had trouble outside of Little Rock. We used to go to town like for recreation trips. We were in town one night outside of Little Rock there in a place called Gurdon, Arkansas, Gurdon and Prescott, Arkansas, and we went up for the evening—trucks took us up—and later that evening, I guess like ten or eleven o'clock, the population of Prescott wanted us out of town, told us we had to leave or something like that. We told them we weren't going to leave until our vehicles came back from our staging area, you know, to pick us up and take us back to the camp. They said, "No, you have to get out of here now," and so forth. So we refused to, and so a riot sort of broke out there. Word got back up north here about the trouble we were having down there, and some of the enlisted soldiers, even the sergeants, said, "We're going to start walking back to Chicago. We're going to leave this here. We're not going to stand for this particular treatment." It so happened the 108th regiment were—I don't know how many miles they were behind us—in the next town, and they were headed down to Louisiana Maneuvers, too, and the 8th. They had all black officers. And I think at this time, they were armed. Their ammunition and so forth, they kept it stored up, but they had access to it. Some of the whites in the south knew that they were coming down there. What really added oil to the situation, that night our officers came into town and told us to get on a truck and avoid a lot of the trouble,

and get on a ride back to the station area, you know, where we were. We were so mad. We didn't want to do that, and so we just walked back there. Ain't going to let anybody run us out of town because we're American soldiers and we're down here getting ready to fight for the country, and you guys are going to take all our rights away.

By one or two o'clock that morning we thought everything had quieted down. After we got back to the bivouac area, we decided everything had settled down. About 1:30 or two o'clock a bunch of whites, those rednecks, had come to our staging area and some of our soldiers had alerted our white officers, you know. This group had formed out there, and it was going to start trouble with us. So he went out there and told them._No, we left town, and we're here in our staging area. "You folks have no business coming here trying add to the trouble." I think a couple of our officers got knocked down; they knocked down just a couple of officers and so forth like that.

DePue: There was actual fighting going on.

Betts: Yeah, that started a fight, and word got back, yeah, right on. Then finally some of our soldiers escaped, got away, and got word back to the 8th Regiment that we had been attacked and we needed help. They speeded up, they finally arrived, and then these whites had to give in and leave.

DePue: The Eighth was an engineer regiment?

Betts: No, the 8th was the old—

DePue: The Old 8th Illinois?

Betts: Old 8th Illinois. Yeah, they were—actually, it was the field artillery what they were trained in, **the big gun**. Old Eighth, yeah.

DePue: But it was also an African-American unit.

Betts: It was all African-American unit with African-American officers and so forth.

DePue: Okay. What was the regiment that you were in? Was that the 94th?

Betts: That was still the 94th.

DePue: Okay, and that's an engineer regiment.

Betts: Engineer regiment, yeah.

DePue: Okay. So how did that story end in Arkansas, then? After the 8th arrived, you were able to—

Betts: When the 8th arrived there the whites left and we were able to move on. Actually we were going through Arkansas on our way down to Louisiana. They're border states, Arkansas and Louisiana, so we were leaving Arkansas, going into Louisiana to finish our maneuvers. So then after the 8th came we were able to finish our maneuvers down in Louisiana as we had intended to do. This was all the news given, everything that had happened down there, yeah. Are you hungry? Do you need something?

DePue: No, I'm fine.

Betts: Maybe you could call over and have them deliver something?

DePue: How did that incident and your treatment make you feel?

Betts: I wasn't going to feel it at all. We know we had enlisted and we were in that service, and we had to make the best of it. We just knew that was a part of being a black in this country, so we don't... I mean, it was a very bad feeling, because we know eventually we were headed overseas, you know, to fight for something that we really didn't have here at home. I was younger then and so forth, and we accepted a lot of that stuff. But as I looked back, you know, I realized that dates and so forth were different year and different times. I probably would have felt much more strongly against it, but at the time I was younger then and you went along with a lot of things that you found out later that you were just mistreated. You know that and they know that. In fact, even the Europeans used to ask us after we got over there, say, "All you men have the same uniforms on. Why does this unit not like you, appreciate you, and you're all soldiers in the same play?" It was hard for us to answer that. It was hard, even now.

DePue: Let's go ahead and move the story up then. Do you recall when you went overseas?

Betts: Yeah.

DePue: Was that 1943?

Betts: It was... Yeah, it was around about '43, '41, yeah. Yeah, about two years later. You're asking about a couple, two years in this country, then about two and a half years overseas, yeah.

DePue: What was the unit you deployed with? Was it still the 94th Engineers?

Betts: When I left and went into the white unit, it was still the 94th. I was with the 94th all the way until I got into France.

DePue: Okay, so you've got a couple years of combat to talk about with the 94th Engineers, it sounds like. Where did you—

Betts: No, 94th Engineers wasn't a combat unit; it was a support unit that built some bridges and laid down supply. At that time, there wasn't no African-American units

in combat. There's a few combat units you had that were all black—you only had two or three—and they fought as black units, not as integrated units, not yet. You had a 99th. They were 99 Tuskegee Flyers out of Tuskegee, Alabama under General Davis. They flew combat assistance to the bombers in Germany, but they were all black unit. Then you had the 92nd Division out of Fort Huachuca, Arizona, which was a local name of the buffalo soldiers who actually weren't the original buffalo soldiers. The original buffalo soldiers fought in the Spanish-American War; the World War II 92nd Division just took up the logo and kept it. They were all black, and they were combat, but they were an all black combat unit, and also you have the other one, the 93rd, the Blue Helmet Division out of Fort McClellan, Alabama. Now, they were all black., In fact, I was already in Italy when 99th Tuskegee Flyers and the 92nd Buffalo Division came over. They came over to Italy, about a week apart when they landed. I was already over there with the 94th, because I came over from Africa, straight from Africa.

DePue: Okay, I want to get you to Africa, though. Where did the 94th ship out of in the United States, and where in Africa did they land?

Betts: We shipped out of New York, out of New York City, and we landed in Oran, second largest city in Algeria. Oran, Algeria, that's where we landed. Some of the American soldiers landed in Marino, Casablanca, Morocco, further south, but we landed in Oran, Algeria.

DePue: It sounds like the 94th, then, was primarily a construction engineer regiment.

Betts: That's right, yeah.

DePue: Was it primarily roads and bridges?

Betts: Supplies and different things like that, yeah.

DePue: Tell me a little bit more about what you did while you were in Africa. Can you talk in any more detail?

Betts: Yeah, after we were stationed around a sea port in Africa, in Oran and so forth, we handled the mostly supplies, things like that that came. The soldiers of the Allies had to be on the front line, so we handled mostly supplies and things like that for them.

DePue: Did you have a chance to meet any of the native population?

Betts: Oh yeah, that's one of the things that I was interested in, because we knew that our ancestors actually came from Africa. They knew our history, too, so I aimed to find out more. I used to have pictures, like I say, over the period of ninety years and me moving around and so forth, and a lot of my pictures got lost or whatever, misplaced. But anyway, I met quite a few of the Africans. You know, you go to the native part—it was called a casbah—places like that you would go and you would meet them. They would call you a lost sister or brother or cousin or whatever they

would call you. They knew about the slavery situation they had there, how they would capture the blacks there and ship them back to the United States. In fact, they had this slave house there; it was about several miles out off the coast of West Africa, right in Senegal there, a little island they called Goree Island, G-o-r-e-e—that's off the coast of West Africa. They would capture the black soldiers from the mainland and they would house them on this Goree Island until the slave boats came in. Then when the slave boats came in they would take so many off this island at a time and put them on slave boats. They had a big door there. In fact, Goree Island is still there, and the slave quarters. In fact, it's a civil tourist attraction now. They had a big door there on this island called the Door of No Return. I mean, once a slave goes down through this door and being dropped down to the slave ship, you're never going to see the motherland again. Then you would have this voyage, which the majority of them, half of them never did make it to the United States anyway, through the conditions on this ship, disease and whatever, treatment, and they never did make it. Those who survived, you know... Well, I guess they were maybe the strongest or whatever would survive, but the majority of them probably didn't survive on that long trip.

DePue: The people that you encountered in Oran, the natives there, did they consider themselves Arabs or did they consider themselves Africans like you?

Betts: Actually, the Arabs is a distinct population. I'd say it was a religious thing, too, the Arabs. In fact, there were a lot of Arabic people; Arabic [Islam]was actually original religion for them. They didn't know that we were all original Arab, you know, among Arab religion at first, before the European and Western powers started sending over missionaries and so forth, trying to convert us over to the Western way of worshipping and stuff like that. So that was the difference to me, sort of changes our...

DePue: So these people, then, they treated you well?

Betts: Oh yeah, they knew that we were captured, treated us well, I guess. Our forefathers was sent on this voyage, you know.

DePue: How long were you in North Africa?

Betts: About a year.

DePue: Okay, and then from North Africa where did you head?

Betts: After the tours of three or four countries in North Africa I was shipped out and I came into Italy where I left. The last country I was in in Africa was Tunisia. Yeah, I was shipped from Missouri to Tunisia.

DePue: So you moved forward as the United States Army, and the Brits were moving from west to east, towards Tunisia.

Betts: Yeah, I went to Tunisia, Libya, places like that.

DePue: Were you in Sicily?

Betts: No, we bypassed those islands of Sicily, Sardinia, places like that. We landed straight into Naples. You know, the Italians call it Napoli; Americans call it Naples, but actually Italians call it Napoli in Italian. Just like Rome: we call it Rome, but in Italian it's Roma, Milano we call Milan and all that. Anyway, we went into Naples. That's in a part of Italy, what they call the boot, in the southern end of Italy. They call that the boot down there, so we bypassed those islands, like Sicily, Sardinia, places like that and went straight into Naples. Had a hard time getting into Naples, too, because there was a lot of fighting around Naples. All these ships were sunk in the harbor; we had to just walk over those sunken ships, things like that, in order to try to get into Naples. We stayed around Naples for maybe seven or eight months mostly. Naples is only a couple miles from Mount Vesuvius where they had the eruptions, volcanic eruptions in...[79 ce.]

DePue: So this was south of Rome but not that far south of Rome.

Betts: Yeah, three or four miles. We were a ways south of Rome. You always had a hard time getting to Rome because that 36th Division that landed in Naples in Southern Italy like we did, they apparently got wiped out in a town called Anzio. They wiped out that 36th. They were out of Texas.

DePue: Yeah, the 36th was beaten up pretty severely in Italy, I know.

Betts: Yeah, they lost...[The 36th Division lost roughly 2,100 in killed, wounded and missing during Monte Cassino, this following equally heavy casualties in battles immediately preceding Monte Cassino.[1]] In fact, Monte Cassino there, which is only a few miles from Rome, controlled the main road to Rome. It was high air altitude, where, whichever country occupied Monte Cassino, had a good vantage point as far as controlling all the roads that are leading through Rome. They say "all roads lead to Rome." In fact, the Allies, the French and the British, American never could take it. I think finally after several months of fighting, they were going to take Monte Cassino. I think that was a Polish regiment. After two months of fighting they finally took Monte Cassino for the Allies. This was a Polish regiment that did that and was able to get past Monte Cassino, and opened a way for them to get into Rome, you know.

DePue: Well, from what I've read, that was some of the most brutal fighting in the entire European theater.

Betts: Yeah, that was terrible fighting along with the Bulge, 'cause the Bulge was not a good fight. It's not considered the—you know, greatest battle. That was on the eastern front after Hitler made the mistake of ordering his best troops to invade Russia. Actually, he could have won the war, the Germans could, if they hadn't opened the second front against Russia, you know, and that turned the tide, because...

[1] See "Battle of Monte Cassino," at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Monte_Cassino.

DePue: Was your unit quite a way south of the front lines, though? I mean, maybe ten or twenty miles south of the front lines where you did most of your work?

Betts: Where, in Italy?

DePue: In Italy.

Betts: Yeah, we were south of the front line there in Italy, because we were stationed mostly at that time around Mount Vesuvius. So Italy, uh huh.

DePue: This is still pretty rugged terrain, though, isn't it?

Betts: Oh yeah. In fact, in Italy we had to sleep on the ground there in all kind of weather, all our equipment and everything, daily life, we slept on the ground. In fact, we slept for eight months on the ground in Italy. Oh yeah, we had what our military call the pup tents, or shelter halves, what the military would call it. Each soldier would carry a half of his shelter, and you clip them together at one point. You only had one way to get in, and it was about the size of this table. You would have to crawl in and you crawl out. Sometimes when you clip them together you dig a little trench around outside because of the rain so the water would roll off. But we had to sleep on the ground for eight months, crawling in and out of all our facilities and everything. We were outside. In fact, that was almost as bad as in Africa. We slept on the ground for a year in Africa. We had to sleep on the ground.

In fact, we slept in a—called a foxhole—there in Africa, because we were near the seaport, and we had to watch where the incoming rockets and so forth... We only crawled in and out of our foxhole there, you know. We would be there at night all the time, and you would see the German bombers come over, and you would see the dog fights [aerial battles] they would have up in the air there, you know, in American anti-aircraft fighters You would see them sometimes, get the German planes in the crosshair, you know, and they would hit some from time to time. You would always worry that you would get a direct hit from the rockets, but something more dangerous than the direct hits where we would get, what you call, those fragments. You would get those when those bombs hit the ground and break up., You would get those little fragments, and if they would get you they would kill you. They would kill you instantly. You know, a lot of soldiers got hit by those fragments and they were killed instantly. That's why they warn you, when you see the anti-aircraft gun working, get to your foxhole. We'd be in our foxhole and we would be looking and see them fighting all night long. Once in a while you would see one get hit and burst into flame, you know, and come down to the ground.

DePue: Well, that sounds like a great reason to dig your foxhole deeper.

Betts: Yeah, it was really. But you can lose quite a few men to accidents; a lot of it's not always to direct fire. So we lost soldiers to accidents and things like that.

DePue: Arthur, I wondered if you could tell me more about your specific duties with the engineers. What exactly were you doing?

Betts: With the engineers?

DePue: Yes.

Betts: Yeah, with the engineers most of what we were doing was building bridges and unloading supplies. In other words, we had water to cross, like the Danube River, the Rhine River. We would have to lay what they call in the military a pontoon bridge; you wouldn't be able to make a permanent bridge like a viaduct like you would have back here in the States. It would be what they call like logs and things, and you would lay them across the water so that your heavy equipment could come and get across—your tank, and your armored division could get across. We had to lay these pontoon bridges, and a lot of the time we were out there right at the topon these tanks, while the Germans were on the other side, high ground, shooting down at us. We'd be exposed to that because we'd be riding on top of the tanks on these pontoon bridges until we get to the other side. Once you get to the other side then you would have to get off and sort of crawl. They teach you how to crawl in the military, this belly crawl, sometimes a block, two blocks at a time to get out of direct fire of the German guns. We had to do that, and once you're across the bridge, you wasn't safe then.

DePue: Well, when we first started this interview and I asked if you were in the combat engineers, you corrected me and said, "Well, I wasn't in the combat unit." But Arthur, what you just described sounds to me pretty close to being in combat, somebody shooting at you!

Betts: Yeah, yeah, yeah, but actually we weren't enlisted as combat engineers, no. We were construction engineers.

DePue: Okay, but that doesn't mean that nobody was shooting at you, though! (laughter)

Betts: No, you're right. They shot at us.

DePue: So I would assume in Italy, especially—this is very rugged terrain; it's not easy to be building bridges and roads in that terrain.

Betts: No.

DePue: What was the most significant engineering challenge that the Army had there?

Betts: It's protecting the seaport in Naples. That's where all the Allied supplies and things came in at. That was the biggest job they had, landing in Naples, because at that time Rome was still occupied by the Germans and Italians, you know. You couldn't get into northern Italy, so southern Italy, round there, that was the most important job, trying to get to Rome.

DePue: What was your impression of the Italian people?

Betts: Italian people, they knew they were allied with Germany, whether they did it voluntarily or not, which they didn't volunteer. Their leader, Mussolini, was allied with Hitler and they were forced to go along with the Italian government, yeah. So they treated us all right because some of them, I guess, realized that actually we were over there in order to try to take some of the power away from Germany and Italy, because they didn't care for the Germans either during that time in the war, you know.

DePue: Did they treat the blacks like yourself pretty well?

Betts: Yeah, Italians, they treated... We were always, the blacks were always very very well and so forth, because according to early history, they were invaded by blacks many years ago in the early years. Africa actually invaded them and stayed in Italy for a number of years. That's where you find so much of the southern population of Italy, all the darker complexion, because Hannibal invaded them with all his troops from Africa, and they know about him.

DePue: Okay. How long were you in Italy, then? You said seven months around the Naples area?

Betts: About eight months.

DePue: Did that take you into early 1944?

Betts: Yeah.

DePue: Where did the 94th go after their service in Naples, then?

Betts: Well, they came into France. D-Day was June 6, 1944. Originally, Germany had occupied, took all the western countries in Europe—Belgium, the Balkan countries, I mean, Slavic countries, you know, Czechoslovakia and all of them. So D-Day invasion, some of the American forces invaded from England, because when American Allies first went over there in '43 and '44, they couldn't land in Europe so England was a base for them until D-Day. But we went over a few months later. My unit, we bypassed England altogether from New York in the United States and went directly to Africa, so we invaded France across the Mediterranean, across nearly from Southern France, to Marseilles, which is the second largest city in France. The other American forces came across the Channel, Normandy Beach and so forth, from England, so we invaded France from two fronts. One from Allies came in high—planes, parachutes and so forth—June 6, 1944, across the English Channel to western France. We came in at the same time, through southern France, through Marseilles. [Operation Dragoon]

DePue: Okay. I think that's part of the Seventh Army, then, that you would have been with. Does that sound right?

Betts: No. I winded up with the Third Army.

DePue: I know you guys rounded up with them, but I know the Third Army would have been in Normandy area. Should we take a quick break here?

Betts: I wasn't in Normandy. Normandy area came, yeah, they came from England. I was in Seventh Army, yeah; see, we came in from Italy.

DePue: And when you were in southern France with the 94th Engineers still, what kind of duties was the Ninety-fourth doing in southern France?

Betts: Well, what they were doing—yeah, we were headed up towards Paris, that way, and we landed there. We should have headed towards the front, but we were miles behind the front; most of the fighting wasn't in southern France, it was farther north.

DePue: Were you still building roads and bridges then, in France?

Betts: No, not that many. No, not that much. We were heading towards the main battle, you know. We were stationed around southern France around a town called Dijon, which is commonly called the mustard capital of the world. Yeah, D-i-j-o-n.

DePue: Oh, well then I spelled it right!

Betts: Yeah, D-i-j-o-n, Dijon. The southwestern part of France is the Burgundy section, which is the wine section of France, you know, but we were in Dijon, and that's where I was called off in Dijon in order to go with this all white...

DePue: Okay, but the last thing I want to know about the 94th is, what exactly was the 94th doing in the Dijon area? Was it not really all that busy?

Betts: No, yeah, it's just where we landed at after we left, in that Dijon area. Yeah, the bridges, things like that. But the main thing, our aim was to go further north than Dijon. Dijon is mostly like in the south-central part of France. The help was needed toward the German/French border. That's where the help was needed. That's why they called for volunteers from the...

DePue: Well, let's get to that part of the story, because I know that's the part that you've been eager to tell about. I've certainly been very excited to hear that story. So you've got the Americans and the Brits, the Allies are fighting their way across northern France; you've got your force that you're part of, fighting their way in southern France and headed into Germany from that flank. But then you get up to, I think it was December sixteenth, when everybody was surprised. That's the date, as I recall, that the Germans launched the Battle of the Bulge.

Betts: That's correct.

DePue: Why don't you pick up the story from there, Arthur?

Betts: Okay, the Battle of the Bulge. Okay, I want to rest just for one minute.

DePue: Okay, we're going to take a quick break then.

Part 2 continued on next page)

Interview with Arthur Betts

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Interview #2, Date: October 27, 2008

Interviewer: Mark DePue

DePue: Okay, we're back again with Arthur Betts after a very short break. Arthur, we had just got you to that crucial point: the Battle of the Bulge has begun, and Eisenhower and the Americans realize, "Holy cow, we're running out of infantrymen!" That's where we want to pick up your story, if you'd go ahead.

Betts: Yeah, they said they'd run out of infantrymen, because up to that point America had lost a lot of men. After America and the Allies were fighting on two fronts, you know, the far eastern front there, Pacific, and the western front, they had lost a lot of men. We had lost a lot of men in Africa, especially El Alamein was a big turning point in Egypt. I guess the German Afrika Korps, General Rommel, fought there, and they were fighting against the American Allies, and also the British Eighth Army under General Bernard Montgomery. Hitler was fighting both sides, but the Germans would want it too! (laughter) The supply line got too long then and Germany wasn't able to... Either that or they had to fly supplies into Africa at that time, because the biggest ship they had at that time had damage, the Bismarck. It would control the waters between Europe and Africa. So the British and the Eighth Army, one of them—Montgomery finally defeated Rommel in the Afrika Korps there, in El Alamein, primarily because the Germans were running out of supplies. They couldn't get the amount of supplies they needed to them.

Hitler had also opened this eastern front, I guess Russia, which he shouldn't have done. The majority of the best soldiers were already originally on the western front, but after he opened the front with Russia on that 5,000 mile front, he had to move with all his best troops to the eastern front there against Russia, and he got slaughtered there at Stalingrad under the Russian General Zhukov, Marshall Zhukov. But anyway, the General warned him not to invade Russia. Russia at that time had good armor, you know, and supplies, men, so forth, armored vehicles, tanks, so forth. He figured Russia would be sort of almost like a walk in the park. He figured he could take Russia with all their power and everything, and then turn back west against Britain, the United States, and France, but it didn't work out that way with the winter coming in and everything, and they got slaughtered there.

So America had lost a lot of men there and lost a lot of men in Italy, like I told you about the 36th Division getting wiped out and the war been going on a couple years by then. So Hitler had issued an order, "Fight to the last man," after the war on the eastern front. I guess Russia wasn't going good for him. He had to give orders to fight to the last... After the Belgian Bulge, you mentioned about, that was his last big battle, all the Germans, because the west had been invading Germany mile by mile. So the Bulge was his last big battle, so he had gave his General there at the Bulge the orders to fight to the last man there, too, and had a big battle there at the Remagen Bridge. They had a terrific battle. Germans were told to hold the Remagen Bridge there, so the German supply could get through, but the British

Army—I don't know who's the commander—was it Alexander? Was the commander then—

DePue: Well, Montgomery would have been the commander.

Betts: No, Montgomery was an overall British commander, but he wasn't the one that was going to take the task of aiding the American forces who were already in the Bulge. See, the British Army were supposed to cross the Remagen Bridge and come there and give American Allies support, but for some reason they got held up and weren't able to get through at an appropriate time when the American forces were expecting them to. The Germans realized that they had tied up the British forces at the Remagen, so that's when the German general—I can't think of his name—he gave the American general then—what was the guy's name?—ordered him to surrender at the Remagen Bridge at the Bulge there. The American general, told him, "Nuts!"

DePue: I think that's McAuliffe.

Betts: I think it was, yeah, and he told him he wasn't going to surrender.

DePue: That would have been at Bastogne.

Betts: Yeah, and he didn't surrender at the Bulge, so when Germany got defeated they had the Bulge. That was the last big battle. That Bulge actually was a—you would think that a bulge is a piece of land here with a bulge up, but it wasn't that. A bulge was a large piece of land where the Allies had a pincer movement like on both sides, and made like a bulge out of it. It's spread out on both sides. Because it was in Belgium—it was called a Belgian Bulge—they went through. But they held on—General McAuliffe—and the Germans weren't able to. They lost that battle, and finally the bridge was able to… I remember now, they were able to get through at the Bulge.

In fact, he made another mistake before the Bulge, in Belgium too. He was at Dunkirk. See, the British had the expeditionary force that they sent into Belgium there. It had landed in Dunkirk, Belgium. At the same time Hitler, the Germans, were blitzkrieging England twenty-four hours a day. They were bombing England and so forth. But actually, if you're looking for some reason, the generals wanted him to actually invade because that was before America, the United States, had entered the war, before they had come over there with supplies to help Britain out, and then they could have knocked Britain out then, took all the big navy they had and would have ruled it very easy, but at the time Hitler was cautious. He didn't do it. He didn't throw that British full force that was trapped at Dunkirk. Instead, he captured them in prisons, made POWs [prisoners of war] out of them. He allowed his generals to let them get away, let them escape. He allowed them to escape and get back to England; they were able to fight another day, and that hurt him.

DePue: Well, as I recall, in reading about the 2221, Eisenhower, in the midst of the Battle of the Bulge, made an appeal for blacks to serve as infantry soldiers. Is that right? Do you recall that?

Betts: Yeah, I was in Dijon at the time, and I recall it. The Bulge was going on all over there, and America knew it was weakened, and that was Germany's last big stand. America needed bodies, they needed men in order to try to save lives and shorten

the war. So in that particular case, you had all these black soldiers stationed all over the Mediterranean, Africa, and so forth, and America really needed the men. At that time, in '44-45, at the Battle of the Bulge, there wasn't any American forces coming over to Europe at that time in the fight, so it was already over there. Most of them already had basic training but not direct combat training. That's when General Lee [Gen. John H.C. Lee], Eisenhower's assistant, who was African-American himself, General Lee told Eisenhower at that time—President Truman wasn't involved in this at all—told Eisenhower, "We have all these black soldiers over here, you know, doing manual work, doing supplies, driving trucks into port, so forth, but we need men. We need bodies on the field there to save lives, shorten this war. We're weakened. Nothing's coming over. Why don't you issue a proclamation order to all these black units over there for volunteers to come and help out in combat?" But at the time, none of the black units or soldiers knew, even the volunteers, that they would be sent to all white units, because up 'til that time they knew that in the history of the United States, the American Army had been segregated the whole time. If they were called up to help out, they would be called and sent to segregated units, like it was at the present and like it always has been.

So Eisenhower agreed to go to Truman, like General Lee had told him, to issue a proclamation, a call for these black soldiers. So I think the call went out. Over 5,000 black soldiers, through whatever reason—patriotism, how they felt, just to the challenge of wanting to leave the organization—5,000 answered the call. Out of the 5,000 only 2,221—I don't know how that figure was came up with—were actually selected, and they were sent to ten different all-white combat units, ten different divisions; they were known finally as the 2,221 Negro volunteers—that word 'Negro' was used at that time—Negro volunteers of World War II, which a lot of people don't realize. So I, Arthur Betts, was one of the original members of the 2,221 that were called up to do this military combat training before being sent to this all-white 99th Checkerboard division.

DePue: Now, Arthur, here's my ultimate question for you: why did you volunteer?

Betts: That was for a challenge more than anything else. Also I thought that by fighting in combat—I had been overseas over two years—I I had a feeling that after the war ended the combat men who did all the fighting there would have priority for being returned to the States, but that wasn't the case. That's what I figured out, because actually when they returned you from the war, what the military at the time called points—points meaning the number of times, number of months and so forth you had spent overseas—that's what it was regardless of your branch of service. So what did I have, two of those? I had enough of those points to come back early once the war had ended; I didn't realize that, but that was one of the sticking points with me. I thought if I did volunteer and survive and the war ended, I'd been in combat, I would have priority for coming back to the States and the reason), more so than it was just 'patriotism', and I don't think that was anything finally to do with it.

DePue: Did you have something to prove to yourself?

Betts: Yeah, in a way; we blacks always want to prove that we could make a contribution just like everybody else, even though we knew about the 369th, the situation the

Hellfighter Regiment went through in World War I. We wanted to prove that we could fight and we were able to.

DePue: I wonder if you could tell me in some detail about that first experience, traveling from your unit, the 94th, then linking up with the 99th Division—

Betts: 99th, that's right.

DePue: —and I think it was the 393rd Infantry Regiment in the 99th Division that you joined?

Betts: Yeah, it was Company E, 393rd Regiment of the 99th Checkerboard Division.

DePue: Okay. Talk to me about when you first married up with that unit.

Betts: We were accepted by that unit. We were accepted very well there, because no one thought about skin color so much at that time, because mainly then you wanted someone to fight like hell, someone to protect your back; that was the main thing they worried about. In fact, actually most of them were glad to see you, to receive you, because when they joined up together like that there were a lot of white soldiers that were assigned directly from their unit to sign up with the incoming black soldiers. A lot of them didn't want to leave. I mean, they were given another assignment, and a lot of them didn't want to leave the black soldiers because they knew the black soldiers were good fighters and everything. It worked out well. In fact, one of the company commanders there would say of all his years in military command in the different white units, he'd never seen anything like compared with some of the black soldiers that came in as fighters. He said, the main thing about them, they wasn't such good fighters out here when they started fighting like that. His biggest job that he had was to try to stop them from fighting. I mean, in other words, he seen something in those black soldiers that he had never experienced in some of the white soldiers that he had commanded over the years, he said. So that was a high, in spite of some of the recommendations he had gotten prior to the black soldiers coming into the 99th, because he was given a different opinion. He didn't know how well they would do in combat, and things like that. But he was given the wrong information.

DePue: How many other blacks were joined with you to Company E? Do you have an idea?

Betts: No more than several. I did have a list of the number of black soldiers that were killed during this integration. So out of the ten divisions, you know, we have a memorial service for the black soldiers who got killed during the Battle of the Bulge. Each one of those divisions, we had a memorial service. Our first one, we had a reunion, got together—what year was that?

DePue: Ninety-nine?

Betts: Ninety-four? Somewhere. I'll find out what year it was, '94... Yeah, we had a reunion in Atlanta, Georgia, at Reverend Martin Luther King's church down there. We had a memorial service, his church, the Ebenezer Baptist Church, and we had a reunion down there. It listed the names of each one of these black soldiers who got killed, and out of each one of these units, yeah, he would send...

DePue: Do you need some help?

Betts: No.

DePue: Looks like you're looking for some documents here. Were there white replacements that came in at the same time that you and your fellow blacks came into the unit?

Betts: No. No, no. There weren't any whites coming in, either from overseas or either from the States. That's why they called us up. We were already over there, and that's why they called us.

DePue: Well, I would think one advantage i, the way the Army was sending in replacements was that the replacements would come straight in from the United States or from England, and they would have very little training. Here are all these black troops that come in with lots of experience.

Betts: Lots of training, yeah.

DePue: And for a company commander who's in the thick of fighting, that means everything, I would think! (laughter) Okay, do you recall your first combat experience with the unit?

Betts: Yeah, in a way. I can't think of what city this was in. Yeah, because I remember when I was leaving Belgium—combat experience—they were sending me to join the 99th. We had to fight over German dead bodies and so forth. I fought in order to get up to the front. You have to walk over all these, going in from Belgium to Germany, because Belgium and Germany have a common border. I left a town in Belgium called Aachen, not too far from Cologne, Germany, places like that, and you had to go and fight all over these fallen Americans and had to fight your way through that, and German soldiers low on the ground. That's kind of scary. Of course, you fight your first days of combat, and a lot of these men have been on the ground for several days and so forth. You wouldn't recognize them because most of them they're bloated up, two or three times their size and everything. It's really something. Then you realize what General Sherman said in the Civil War, that war is hell. You think about that, and you wonder, Gee, what did I volunteer for, going through all this (laughter) stuff like that, you know.

You're skipping over bodies—a body here, body there—you're walking between them, you know. If one is still alive, partly dying, he may ask you, if you're an American soldier, before you fall, if you're able to get back, he'll give you a little number or something, "Contact my family…" and so forth. "You just tell them, "I did the best I could. I fought to the last." So you say, OK, you promise. "I'll tell them that you were a hero." He'd say to take whatever people may have on, any ammunition or whatever, whatever else you needed, take it, use it. Then whatever he had on him—you'd see he was dying—whatever you could use, you would take it and keep it, and keep moving, because you'd have orders from the commander, where you have to get to a certain point at a certain time. You know, you got to move on. You feel sorry for the guy, but you have to just keep going. But it was rough.

DePue: Were you surprised that it was a lot different from your experience with the engineers, or was it?

Betts: Oh, yes! Yeah, this was very different, altogether different. This was tough.

DePue: What was it, Arthur, that kept you going, then?

Betts: I don't know. Well, you'd come to the conclusion, you'd laugh, and say, "Well, I may give out, I just won't give in." It's a matter of giving out and giving in, and that's what it amounted to. So you took it one day at a time if you were going to last as long as I can. The Chinese philosopher Sun Tzu [a great military strategist] said a thousand years ago, that a thousand mile trip starts with the first step, so we decided to use that as our philosophy. That's where we kept going, because we knew we were suffering, we complained about it, but our commander always tell us—how , did that go?—sixty years ago, he used to tell us every morning when we started complaining, "All you need to remember as long as you live that I pity the man who had no shoes until I saw the man who had no feet." In other words, we're complaining but there are other groups, people in just as bad of shape as we were, and that the person who had no shoes, he had a thousand pairs of shoes if he had feet to put them on, and the other man, he had a thousand pairs of shoes, he had no feet to put them on. We didn't want to hear that at the time because we were already suffering, but he would tell us that. He figured that would give us a little inspiration or things like that, but it didn't help us at all.

DePue: Can you tell me a little bit about the relationship you had with the other soldiers in your squad?

Betts: It was very good after they knew that we were good fighters; they were proud of us. They knew that we were capable of doing a job, which we did, and we saved them, a whole lot of them. Actually quite a few of us African-American soldiers actually were NCO, non-commissioned officers, had to give up pay in order to join a white unit, because at that time it wasn't fashionable. They didn't want a black soldier to outrank a white soldier at that time, so even if you came in with a non-commissioned badge or whatever, that was superior to a white, you would have to get demoted because they figured it wouldn't work. It wouldn't be kosher to have a black man before white.

DePue: Did that happen to you? Oh, you were private at the time.

Betts: No, I was an NCO. It happened to me, too, because I was master sergeant at that time. It happened to all NCO officers at that time. They lost—they had to take their—

DePue: So you were a Master Sergeant in the Engineers?

Betts: No, I was a regular Staff Sergeant.

DePue: Staff Sergeant. And then you became a private?

Betts: They pushed me down to private, yeah. You lose all that.

DePue: Well, that's a significant difference in pay, too.

Betts: It sure was. Well, you know about military—oh, you must be in the military.

DePue: Yeah, I have—

Betts: Well, you know all that. So yeah. So that's what it was, they brought you down. They didn't want you to command, but that was unfortunate, but in spite of that a lot of the blacks, they went through it anyway, even though they lost pay.

DePue: In your particular squad were there any other black soldiers, or were you the only one?

Betts: No, there were two or three more in my unit.

DePue: In your squad?

Betts: Yeah.

DePue: I'm curious. Were there any white soldiers in your squad from the south? And did they treat you any differently from the other whites?

Betts: No, they didn't. They weren't no different then. It was war time then, and, like I say, it was a matter of survival then. They were all brothers, then. It's hard. You would think it would be that way all the time, but—

DePue: So it was different because you joined the unit and went in there in the heat of battle?

Betts: Yeah, it had to be. It was different.

DePue: Now, you talked earlier that when you were in Little Rock you saw some of the ugliness of American society and the prejudice at that time. Did it surprise you, the different kind of reception that you got when you joined an all-white infantry unit?

Betts: Yeah, it really surprised me, but then I thought about it was a different situation, a different time, and then we realized that it was an emergency. Like the only reason they had called at that time—Truman and Eisenhower—was because the need was greater than anything else that was on the plate at the time. If there hadn't been a need for the black soldiers, this event never would have happened. It was through necessity that they needed the 2,221; they needed us, and they closed their eyes to everything else but that. That's what it was.

DePue: So one of the ironies of the Battle of the Bulge is it gave black soldiers an opportunity to prove themselves?

Betts: That's correct. That's what it was, yeah, black soldiers who proved themselves. After the war, most of the black soldiers got quite a few honors. In fact, I received the... The European armies used the Croix de Guerre, the dark green and red ribbon [there are a variety of colors of Belgium ribbons], which the Allies doesn't use. The Belgian government sent me a Croix de Guerre. Now, some of the American soldiers at the units are used in the last few years; it's a ribbon that goes around your shoulder, fits under the arm, and hangs down the middle—

DePue: It's a pretty dark green and red ribbon?

Betts: Yeah.

DePue: Braid?

Betts: Croix de Guerre, red ribbon, they use that around your shoulders, so I think I may have... Could you stand up a minute?

DePue: Hmm?

Betts: Could you stand up for a minute?

DePue: Sure.

Betts: Yeah... Open that…swing that last drawer. Can you get by? Pull that uniform jacket off. No, to your left. Yeah, that one there, pull it off.

DePue: This one right here?

Betts: Yeah. That's the one there. Yeah, that's a Croix de Guerre. The Belgian government sent me that after the way, and told me that was for the contribution I did for their country, they said, during the war. In fact, at the time they wanted me to do something—even though their embassy had wrote me—they wanted me to come to Belgium to receive it. I never got to Belgium the way they wanted me to come over there to accept it, but they mailed it to me some time ago. I got it up there, but it was pinned on a little different, the way they put it on, because at the time when they sent it to me I didn't know how to put it on. They had instructions, and I went to several tailors to try to get somebody to put it—they'd never seen anything like that! I finally had some Korean tailor shop put it on for me, the Croix de Guerre, that is, so when I wear it now a lot of places I go, schools and things like that, they invite us on holidays so the youngsters can see what a military jacket look like. They've never seen an American jacket with that Croix de Guerre on it, and I have to explain it to them what it is. It's not American, it's a Croix de Guerre. So we'll be going to something maybe on Veteran's Day; quite a few of these patriotic holidays they invite us out to meet along with the Tuskegee 99th [a famous all-black [Army Air Force] unit in WWII] because we're both 99th, but they're air and I'm ground. We go along, and we'll be together, Tuskegee. The other medal there is a bronze star medal.

DePue: I noticed that.

Betts: Yeah, you earn that from combat battles and so forth. Then you've got what you call the CIB badge there, the blue one—

DePue: The Combat Infantryman's Badge.

Betts: Oh, you know it. Yeah. I had quite a few more, so I can get it on and put a few in there.

DePue: Before we leave today, then, I want to get a picture of you with that jacket on with all your medals and ribbons.

Betts: Well, just a minute.

DePue: I've got my camera with me.

Betts: Well, maybe you can take a—

DePue: Well, after we get done with the interview.

Betts: They invited me to the—what was it, about two, three weeks ago?—I was down in Springfield; they had the sixtieth anniversary commemorating the race riot they had down in Springfield back in 1908.They heard about me, and then the NAACP

invited me down to their dinner they had there. They took that picture. You can take it off here. And they took a picture...

DePue: Well, we can maybe find that after the interview's over here.

Betts: Just a minute. A picture of me here...

DePue: While we're looking for that, Arthur—

Betts: Yeah, here's a card from Nancy Pelosi, the Speaker of the House. She sent me that card. I was in Washington, D.C. in September, twice. She sent me a card to come there and to receive my recognition there.

DePue: But all this recognition has taken kind of a long time. We're talking sixty plus years after the fact!

Betts: Yeah, after all these years, the NAACP in Springfield last week had me down there for that dinner, and they had this civil rights man down there, John Lewis.

DePue: Oh, yes!

Betts: Yeah, who got assaulted on the Edmund Pettus Bridge down there [in Selma, Alabama]. He was the keynote speaker down there. Yeah, here's a picture, October twenty eighth.

DePue: I want to go back to the end of the Second World War where you're still in northern France, then Belgium, and then into Germany. Arthur, do you remember hearing about when the first units came across some of the concentration camps and found out what the Germans had been doing?

Betts: Yep.

DePue: What was your reaction to that? Did you see any of that directly yourself?

Betts: No. No, we never got into Dachau, to the concentration camp near there, because when we were headed into Germany, the Russian was coming in from the east, and we from the west. The Allies and the Russians made an agreement that for the Russians they were going to Berlin, take Berlin for some reason, because Russia had lost quite a bit of men attacking... So we missed some of those—

DePue: But you certainly—

Betts: —missed some of those concentration camps, like Dachau, Bergen-Belsen, places like that. We had a chance to get into them but the Russians had got there first, and the Germans wanted the Allies to get there. They feared the Russians... Really, they feared the Russians would retaliate, be more mean, retaliate more and more and more, so I never got a chance to get to the concentration camp, because when Germany surrendered they divided Berlin up into three sections.

DePue: But my question for you, Arthur, is here you are, an African-American in an all white unit, coming from a country where segregation was very much alive, and you've seen the ugly side of it yourself. Then you heard about what the Germans were doing because of race and because of religion and things like that, slaughtering these people. Did you have a reaction to that when you first heard about that?

Betts: No, not really, because we know it's not like you say, the story they say about chickens coming home to roost, but you know that they had treated other people of color that way. I don't know whether Hitler had taken up the practice from America while America was doing that, so most of the black soldiers just figured they didn't have a feeling about that because they know how their ancestors had been treated and so forth, and now the Germans are doing it against their own race to the Jewish population. It's a different religion, but they're all Caucasian, and the Jewish people maybe were… So we figured—you would say—like chickens coming home to roost. Put it that way. So most black soldiers weren't directly affected by it, no.

DePue: What were your personal hopes for how the United States might change because of what you and your other fellow black soldiers had done coming back after the war? Did you have an expectation that things would change?

Betts: Not really, because that had been in practice over so many years that we didn't figure anything would change, nothing would change, you know. Gradually as the years went by after the war, a few things changed, but a lot of the changes they made they had to; they were already on the books but they were never put into practice. Just like Lincoln said at the Gettysburg Address about, you know, the land of the free, home of the brave, things like that. The Voting Rights Bill, all of that, it was on the books, but it was never put into practice. So we were pessimistic about anything happening like that until years later, until the civil rights marches came along in the sixties, and we knew then that we had a long way to go then, you know. Even then, after our contribution to the war, we know there was nothing to give us comfort. Oh, even when a guy like myself on—what am I going to be, ninety-one on my next birthday? See, when I was a kid growing up, black, African-American kid, nobody ever dreamed or thought of having an African-American now running for President of the United States. [Barack Obama, elected a few days after this interview] All this Jim Crow started, and I never thought he would even have the opportunity to run, but he still had the opportunity now, so that gives you a good feeling, even though he may not win; win or lose, everything wasn't in vain. You see everything wasn't in vain because actually he's made history already. I lived to see that, and all my kids lived to see that. Actually, this is the first time in American history that a black man has been chosen as a candidate of the two largest political parties in the United States, Republican and the Democratic; they chose a black man as a candidate, so I never even got that far. So even though I say he may not win the presidency, but at least I've seen some part of history anyway.

DePue: Do you think that because you were one of those 2,221—I mean, that's pretty elite numbers we're talking about—because you're part of that group that you are one of the people that made that step towards progress?

Betts: I believe so, when you're looking at it from a practical standpoint, even though we're not well known, nationally known, worldwide known as we should be. It was known that we were a part of it. That makes me feel good, too, that I don't mind wearing that uniform now. Before I wore it, to me it was just like a ghost something that maybe I should be wearing. It showed nothing about my contribution. Now, when I wear it, knowing you got a black man opportunity running for President, it gives you more of a feeling that your contribution wasn't made in vain, at least

somebody realized that In fact, Colin Powell [a distinguished American general who became Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of staff] was supposed to speak at one of our get-togethers, but he wasn't able to make it, though. In fact, he was in Chicago several years ago and he was signing one of his books—*American Journey [My American Journey]*, I think the name of it was—across from the bookstore on North Michigan Avenue there, across from the Water Tower. I just told my wife and my kids at the time, I said, "I'm going to wear my CIB Badge [Combat Infantryman's Badge]" I knew that Colin Powell was a veteran, war hero. I said, "I'm going to wear one of my ribbons on there, my CIB badge while he's signing books, and when he see it, see his reaction to it." When I walked in there they had people lined up in line to get an autograph of his book and so forth. They had security around him, and one of his security men told me, "Step aside, step back, no, no, you can't get in line, it ain't your turn,." Colin Powell sitting at the table, saw him. "No. Step back, he's a CIB man." He recognized me. Powell knew what it was and I was able to shake hands with him. "So are you a CIB man?" I said, "Yeah. I served." And he congratulated me.

DePue: Well, the significance of the CIB means you've been there, you've seen the action, you've been in the thick of it.

Betts: Yeah, that's what he told me, yeah, and he told me... the security man was surprised. "Oh, yeah, he told me to get away!" "Let him through." And he had to let me through. So I never will forget that.

DePue: What did you do with your life after you came back to the United States, following the war? What was your career?

Betts: Well, I went into government service, yeah. I did, I went in the Postal Service, and worked my career in the Postal Service, because I figured I was already with the government, I'll just stay with them, and it would be for pension savings, so forth, you would make a different... So I just stayed with them from then on.

DePue: Okay. I want to finish up with some more general questions here for you, primarily focused on your military experience during World War II. What do you think was the most significant thing you learned out of your time in the military?

Betts: I think brotherhood meant a lot to us, because we all suffered together as black soldiers. I think the brotherhood meant a lot to me, you know, the black soldiers that we went through it. And what did I do with it...? I can't find those pictures.

DePue: We can find those afterwards, if you don't mind.

Betts: Yeah. Oh, got some right here.

DePue: Okay. These are the ones you've been looking for here.

Betts: It is, yeah.

DePue: While you're looking at those—

Betts: You mentioned... Yeah, this is a picture of me they took down in the dining room in Springfield last week. We were all in uniform, image of the uniform. That's me again in uniform. That was taken in Springfield.

DePue: Okay. Well that's a good picture!

Betts: Yeah, that came out good.

DePue: Okay. Can you reflect—

Betts: This was taken outside of City Hall on one of these when we were down in Springfield last week. I got one here with Dick Durbin. [Current U. S. Senator from Illinois and Assistant Majority Leader for the Democrats.] He was there at Springfield last weekend and I got one. That's me with Dick Durbin.

DePue: Oh, wow! These are great pictures! Can you reflect on an experience that was especially painful for you during the Second World War?

Betts: Yeah... Yeah, some of the—especially going through some of the southern states, some places I went through that even with uniforms on you would have to move to the back of the bus and so forth. They didn't recognize, even though you're an American soldier who fought in combat, and they didn't recognize the uniform at all. You would have to go to the back of the bus like the other black civilian population of that city, yeah. It didn't make no difference what you did for your country, you were still black, and it was hard to swallow. You would think they would give you a little exception. You couldn't do it.

DePue: How did the experiences you had during World War II—the kinds that you just talked about but also the kinds that you had with the 99th—how did that change you?

Betts: That changed me quite a bit because it made me realize that all people are not the same. When I got with the 99th, you really feel before then that the United States is divided into black and white. Then you realize later that there are some good people, whatever ethnic group or race, whatever, that you had to have that feeling, that they are—from experience you know then that you just can't classify them as a book. Most people use a general classification, you know: all this group is no good. But you realize that's not true. You have to read people on both sides.

DePue: Okay. Are you proud of your service during World War II?

Betts: Yeah, when you get back you see all that before things changed and you wasn't proud of it. I wasn't proud. You know, if I had to do it over again I wouldn't do it, if I had to go through this again or felt this way again. It wouldn't be the same. And if any young person of color would have asked me about them joining the U.S. Military or whatever, I'll probably give them a negative answer from my experience, and it would be—you wouldn't be, in other words, commended for that, doing it that way. It would be different. But some of that has changed now, and I would say just do your thing. I would probably have a different feeling about it. At first I threw up both hands, and say "No, Forget it, No. It wouldn't be worth it. You wouldn't be recognized, and it's all in vain." But with the way the world is moving now, the world is getting smaller, people are getting—things are getting better. So I figure today's the day, and as of tomorrow, you have to accept it day by day. You have to accept it. So I go along with a different program now.

DePue: Maybe this is just revealing my own ignorance: I know quite a bit about military history, but I was not aware until I found out about your story, about those 2,221 black soldiers who joined white infantry units. What's your feeling about the lack of understanding or knowledge that Americans have about your particular contribution?

Betts: They're learning as time goes by, our story, so they are unaware of all that black soldiers all together. They're unaware of it. They don't know it exists.

DePue: Well, maybe your interview will be part of telling the American people about the contributions that you and the rest of your brothers made.

Betts: Maybe. It would be wonderful, yeah, 'cause maybe they can get it on a website or something and let us know that we were around during those times and we fought and died for the country, even though we're not always very rewarded. These are the ten divisions that black soldiers were sent to.

DePue: Okay, excellent.

Betts: And all of the emblems. There's a 99th Checkerboard on there, too.

DePue: Okay, so I'm looking at the 1st Division, 2nd Division, 8th, the 9th Division, the 69th Division, the 12th, the 14th, the 78th, the 99th, and the 104th, and those were the ten divisions that—

Betts: Those were the ten divisions that the black soldiers were integrated into and that they fought with.

DePue: That was a sizable number of the divisions that would have been at the Bulge and that area.

Betts: Yeah.

DePue: Well, Arthur, this has been a real pleasure and an honor for me to have the opportunity to talk to you today. I thank you very much to take the time out and to share your story with us. Again, I was ignorant about it beforehand, but it's so important that we understand what your contribution and the contributions that all Americans made at that time. Do you have any final comments for us?

Betts: Yeah, here's one thing I want you to see that was sent to me.

DePue: Okay. I know you're going through some of the material you collected over the years, attending different functions and things?

Betts: Yeah, no, this is something else.

DePue: We will include some of this material in with our records when we put this together and put it into the archives at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. Any other final comments for us, Arthur?

Betts: I think that should wrap it up. I think that should wrap it up. That should wrap it up. One more thing...

DePue: Yeah, let's go ahead and look for that after we close the interview off here, if we could.

Betts: We're getting late. You've got to get out of town. Lift Every Voice and Sing...

DePue: Okay. Well, Arthur, I think we'll go ahead and end the interview.

Betts: Yeah, we have to end it now because I can't get the—I had a letter from the... Oh, here's one from the Freedom Team.

DePue: Okay. Let me end this by just going ahead and reading this, if you don't mind. This is the Freedom Team Salute: "Certificate of Appreciation is awarded to Arthur Betts for outstanding service to the nation as a United States Army soldier. You are being recognized for your patriotism and continued support to the Army family. Your legacy is today's Army and the values soldiers exhibit while fighting the global war on terrorism. Their efforts are a direct reflection of your service, and the United States Army and a grateful nation thank you." It's signed George Casey, Jr., who's General of the United States Army, and Pete Gehren, Secretary of the Army. Well, that's very impressive. I can see why you were looking for that. One other here you'd like to hand me: "The Honorable Jim Cooper, who is a member of Congress"—your Congressman, I take it?

Betts: No.

DePue: Okay—"presents to Arthur Betts appreciation of your service and heroic actions while serving as the 2,221 Negro Infantry Volunteer of World War II. I bring you greetings and best wishes from the people of the Fifth Congressional District of the great state of Tennessee."

Betts: We were down on our reunion. He gave us that.

DePue: You were on maneuvers in Tennessee, sometime being a long time before that.

Betts: Long before that, yeah.

DePue: Wow, that's cool. That kind of closes the circle. Thank you very much.

Betts: Okay, then. Thank you. That's it, that's it.

(end of interview)