

Veteran: **BEAN, Robert**
Service Branch: **ARMY**
Interviewer: Gammon, Robert
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Terry Moore

Highlights of Service: **World War II; Infantry; Saw combat in France and Germany; Participated in liberation of two concentration camps; Wounded in action**

Interviewer: What was your rank and what branch did you serve in?

Veteran: In the Army. I was with the 12th Armored Infantry Division, and my rank was PFC.

Interviewer: How old are you today?

Veteran: 79.

Interviewer: Where was your basic training at?

Veteran: Camp Robertson, Arkansas, and it was right in the summertime, and they had had a drought, and that was the hottest state I was ever in. They had a lot of rocks out there where we had basic training, and when those things got hot, that temperature just soared, so it was very uncomfortable. It's been so long ago I couldn't tell you who the drill instructors were, but I remember a captain I had was named Kelley. About the time we got through basic training, he told me they were shipping him to Missouri to train new soldiers.

Interviewer: You said it was during summertime when you went through basic training. What year was that?

Veteran: 1941 or '42.

Interviewer: How long was your basic training?

Veteran: We were supposed to have had fourteen weeks, but they had lost so many in combat overseas that they cut our basic training to eight weeks, so we shipped out from

Camp Robertson and then went into Mississippi on maneuvers. Out of Mississippi, we caught a train to New York, and that's where we shipped out.

Interviewer: Describe a day of basic training.

Veteran: You get up before daylight, and you shower, shave, and then you go to breakfast. As soon as breakfast is over, you line up and we did a lot of hiking. They claimed a full pack, with your rifle and all, weighed ninety-eight pounds, and we did a lot of five and ten mile hikes with full packs. If we weren't doing that, then we were over on the rifle range, or marching, or running. We did a lot of running—like a mile run. That was a regular morning thing—a mile run, and it was hot.

Interviewer: After finishing basic training, did you think you would do well in battle?

Veteran: I think every bit of it was essential, because you were getting in physical shape, and you learned endurance. You learned how to do without water, for one thing, and that came in good overseas, because the rumor was that those creeks had been poisoned. I know today there weren't, but that was the rumor that was going around, so you were afraid to drink out of them.

Interviewer: How old were you when you went to basic training?

Veteran: I was just fixing to turn 18.

Interviewer: After basic training, what was life like?

Veteran: Well, after basic training we shipped out. They put us on a train and carried us first to Baltimore, Maryland. We stayed and trained there for about two weeks, and then they shipped us up to New York, and that's where we shipped out. We went over on the *Queen Mary*, which was a luxury liner that had been converted. The British owned this ship, but it had been converted into a troop ship. We got out of New York about three days, and the German submarines got after us, so at night there was no lights on this ship. We would go a certain distance in one direction and then turn and go in another one trying to dodge them things. Before we got to Scotland and England, that's where we landed, some destroyers came out to meet us, and that's the prettiest sight I ever looked at, because they could use those depth charges and sink those submarines. We landed in Scotland, and then we went on into England.

Interviewer: What made you want to join the Army?

Veteran: I knew I was gonna have to go anyway, because I was already signed up for the draft. Back then, they sent you a draft notice that you were supposed to go and sign up for the draft, and once I passed that physical, I knew it was just time. I didn't want in the Navy, because I didn't want to get out there on a boat and get sunk, so I chose the Army.

Interviewer: What town did you grow up in?

Veteran: It was a little community outside of Kirbyville—seven miles east of Kirbyville, called Trout Creek.

Interviewer: Did anybody you grow up with join the same time you did?

Veteran: Yeah, there was a friend of mine that I had gone to school with—Leslie Huff was his name—and he lived down in a little community about five miles from where I grew up. I saw him on that troop ship as we were going overseas. Then there was a boy from Newton that I was in basic training with. Of course I wasn't in basic training with Huff, but I was with this other fella.

Interviewer: After basic training and all your other training, what were your thoughts as you left America?

Veteran: Well, I didn't really want to go. What I mean is, I didn't want to leave my family, which at that time was just my mother, my father, and my brothers and sister, but I was ready to go and get it over with.

Interviewer: Did any of your brothers fight in the same war you did?

Veteran: No. There were two of them that served after I did, but not in the same war I did.

Interviewer: What was the first country you faced in battle, or what were the countries you faced in battle, and can you describe what their soldiers looked like?

Veteran: It was Germany. See, the Italians had been beaten before we got there, and they were under the rule of Mussolini. Germany was the only country that we faced in actual battle.

Interviewer: How did the German soldiers dress?

Veteran: Pretty much the same as us. Their helmets were different in that they had some ear pieces coming down, and ours didn't. That was about the only difference.

Interviewer: What kind of weapons did they use?

Veteran: They had some rifles like we had, but they had a cannon that was called a rifle. It was an 88mm, and it was probably the most accurate piece of artillery that was invented at that time, because they could shoot one shell, and if it missed, the next one wasn't going to. That's why when one hit, you ran because the next one was gonna hit right where you were. It was very accurate. They had a machine gun that shot wooden bullets. The theory behind that was they had lot rather wound you than to kill you, because if they wound you, it usually took two to take care of you, so instead of just one, they'd get three. Those things would hit you and splinters would go all over you. And they had some booby traps that were deadly. You couldn't see them, but if you stepped on one or tripped one, that was it. It was devastating.

Interviewer: What kind of weapons did your infantry use?

Veteran: We used mostly air cooled and water cooled machine guns, and we had rifles—the M-1. Then we had the 50 caliber machine guns that were mounted on tanks, and a vehicle called the half-track, because it had tracks on the back but it had wheels on the front, and it was a troop carrying vehicle. We had the 105 Howitzers on those tanks, and we had different kind of artilleries—some long range, some short range.

Interviewer: What countries did you do combat in?

Veteran: In Germany and France.

Interviewer: In France, what was the setting of the battle like?

Veteran: We cut off a lot of their supplies. In other words, we'd surround the town and then we'd go in it from different sides. We did a lot of fighting at night. When we got into Germany, they didn't give up their territory very easy. It was just a few inches at a time until we broke 'em, and then we'd go pretty good until we hit another town. They had those towns pretty well reinforced. Where we really got bogged down was in the Siegfried Front, which consisted of a lot of bunkers that the French had built as a defense, but the Germans took 'em over. Those bunkers were concrete reinforced

with railroad iron, like on railroad tracks. We finally had to go up and wrap TNT around 'em, and then go back and set it off and just cut 'em off. If there was anybody in it, we either captured them or killed them. It was a slow, slow process.

Interviewer: What was the enemy like when you captured them? How did they react to you?

Veteran: Some of them did alright, but they had the SS troops. One time we had a bunch of 'em, and we made the mistake of not searching 'em. We were marching 'em in a line, and all of a sudden, they came out with grenades and started throwin' them, and killed a bunch of people, so, we just shot 'em.

Interviewer: Let's talk about France again. What are some of the missions you went on there?

Veteran: In France, it was just more or less patrolling. The French had already given up. There were just a very few Germans still in France when we got there, so they didn't give us a lot of resistance. In my opinion, the French people were a sorry bunch of people. We had captured some of 'em who had short wave radios, and they were relaying to the Germans our movements.

Interviewer: The French were?

Veteran: The French were. I'd say 85% of the French men wore a mustache like Hitler wore.

Interviewer: Why was that do you think?

Veteran: The reason I think it was was because some of them French people idolized him. Why would they be relaying to the German army our movements, and that's what they were doing.

Interviewer: Talk about some missions in Germany.

Veteran: OK. One of the worst ones was crossing the Rhine River. Before we could cross that Rhine River we came to a town that was a railroad center—Mannheim, Germany. Before we got there, the sky would be full of bombers bombing this town, and when we finally captured it, the best we could figure out it had twelve different railroad tracks through it, and of course all them bombs had literally torn them all to pieces, but they were still fighting. It took us the better part of probably four days to ever capture that thing, even with all that bombing. I seen the sky completely full of those four engine bombers going over. Some of 'em would bomb Mannheim, some of 'em

would go over and bomb the Germans on the other side of the Rhine River, because they knew that once we crossed that Rhine River that we was gonna pretty well take Germany, so they put up a lot of resistance there. The engineers would build pontoon bridges across that Rhine River, and as soon as they got 'em built, the Germans would blow 'em up, so the Navy sent some boats in there, and they finally built a bridge across it. When we were going across that bridge—a pontoon bridge—just as we got to the other side, they bombed that thing, and I didn't think I'd ever come up. I was in that Rhine River tryin' to get out of it, but we finally got across it, and then we went on.

Interviewer: You had told me once in France that you and another guy were trapped in a potato cellar?

Veteran: Oh, that was in Germany. Yeah, we went into a town—I don't remember the name of it—and there was a fella named George Steele who was a longshoreman out of New York, and I got in this wine cellar. We'd gotten cut off from everybody else, and so we was in this wine cellar for best I can remember two days and three nights. We couldn't get out. If you did, you'd get shot. Another outfit came in there and got us out. The thing I remember about that experience is they raised a lot of sugar beets, and turnips, and potatoes, and that's what we ate while we were in that thing. And they had three barrels of wine, and we drank their wine and ate their sugar beets for about two or two and a half days. On our final push towards Berlin, this same man and I were on an outpost. I never will forget this. We were at a cemetery, and there were two German soldiers that were cutting across that cemetery, and we capture them. One of them could speak broken English, and he told us, "I'm glad it's over with." He said, "We had no ill feelings towards ya'll." We told him, "We have nothing towards you either." That was the first two that was captured on that final push out of our outfit.

Interviewer: How did the French and German civilians react to you?

Veteran: In Germany a lot better than France—a lot better. In one town we went into, there was a lady—and evidently her husband was in the service one way or another—but she had a daughter that was about twelve or fifteen years old, and it didn't happen much, but she fixed us something to eat. She sure did. Now the German civilians, they treated us good, except one place. That's where I got hurt the second time.

They weren't so nice to us then. At that town, there was some kind of communication mix-up. We went in that morning, but during the night a German division had moved in on the outskirts, and when we went in they cut us off. The civilians were shooting at us just like the soldiers were in that particular town, so you could say some of 'em were alright and some of 'em weren't.

Interviewer: Did you receive any wounds, and what were your first thoughts when your squad came under enemy fire? What was it like?

Veteran: Well, it was a nightmare, is the best I can explain it. You're scared, naturally. The first one that I was in was in a beet field, a wide open field. The farmers had piled sugar beets out in the their fields just like they did potatoes, and they would gather 'em later and bring 'em in. The only thing we knew to do was get behind 'em. One time, there was a tank coming, and we had a bazooka, which looked like a piece of pipe, but you put a shell in it and a wire on that shell, and it had a trigger. That's what you used to shoot tanks with. Well, this old boy missed that tank, of all things. It went under it, and it didn't go off. I can still see the driver of that German tank just lower than 88 and shoot that beet pile. He missed us, and hurt this old boy that shot the bazooka, but he blowed them beets all to pieces. About that time, one of our tanks started shootin' at him and he forgot us, and I got this old boy out that was hurt, and carried him out there where he was a little bit safe, but that was the first one that I was in that was that bad. We had skirmishes other than that, but that was a long time before we got to Mannheim, and I don't know where in Germany that was, but it was a farming region anyway.

Interviewer: Let's go back to basic training real quick. What was your punishment if ya'll fell out of line or did something wrong?

Veteran: KP.

Interviewer: What was that like?

Veteran: Well, you got up, you cooked, you peeled potatoes for the cook, you washed dishes, and I was on KP eight times the first two weeks I was in basic training, because if you fouled up, they put you on KP. You served the breakfast, you washed the dishes. You peeled potatoes and got ready for lunch. You served lunch, you washed the dishes again. You mopped the kitchen, then took out all the garbage as you're gettin'

ready for supper. Supper's over—you wash dishes, you mop the floor again, and then you go to your barracks and go to sleep. You did get to eat pretty good, though.

Interviewer: What was the food like?

Veteran: It was good. Same thing most all the time, but my goodness, you could get full anyway. The basic training wasn't hard on me, but it was on a lot of people, because I was used to working on a farm when I was a boy. Those mile runs didn't mean a thing to me, because when I was a boy the nearest movie was seven miles up there at Kirbyville. A bunch of us would get together and jog most of the way to Kirbyville and pay no mind to it, and then we'd jog back home. The next morning at daylight you were up and working in a field, so basic training didn't bother me, but some of them old boys came in there and were completely out of shape, and they couldn't even make a mile hike with a full pack. Like I say, with your rifle your pack weighed about ninety-eight pounds. When we'd go on those long hikes, we'd have four or five ambulances behind us picking up those people that couldn't make it.

Interviewer: Let's go back to the battles. Did you receive any wounds? If so, how did you receive them, and if you don't mind saying what does a wound feel like?

Veteran: The first time I got wounded was in the thumb. The second time was when I was asleep, and something woke me up. I was in an old building there in Germany, and there was a German soldier that had a knife. When he started down with it, I kicked it and that thing stuck through my boot, and I've still got that scar there. I never did report it First Aid. If I had I'd a got a Purple Heart. The next one was when we got cut off again, and this was when that German division had come in during the night and we didn't know anything about it. So when we took this town, they moved in, and there was a tank that had got hit, and the thing was on fire. I was trying to get the driver and his partner out of that thing through one of them hatches that was up on top, and about that time an artillery shell hit right under me and blew me about probably eight or ten feet up in the air, and when I came down there was two machine guns started shootin' at me, and that's when I got shot up and tore up. I got shot in the hip, and I got shrapnel all over me, and it shot two ribs and a kidney out. I had a leg paralyzed for about two years, and I've still got some of that stuff in me. Your mother picked a piece out of my eye when she was a girl. It was just about an inch long, and it was real narrow, and it was real, real shiny. When we were at

Palestine when your mother was born and Steve was two years old, a Dr. Walcott cut a piece out of my face about the size of a dime, and I lost that. Out of our outfit, as far as I know there was three of us that got out of there, and they took us out on stretcher jeeps. The medics had fastened stretchers onto these jeeps to carry people out. There was a friend of mine that I was overseas with from Tyler named Tim Harvey, and he came out there to help get me out of that street, and they shot him, too. There was two machine guns shootin' at me at that time. That was the end of my war. That was on the 31st of March in 1945.

Interviewer: What did it feel like?

Veteran: Hot. Hurt just like they took a real hot iron and stuck you with it. It hurt so bad that I didn't mind the hot part because it hurt so bad. That one that went through my hip is the one that had that leg paralyzed for about two years. I guess that one hurt worse than any in my back, or my face, or my legs either, because I got shrapnel in them.

Interviewer: What kind of medals did you receive?

Veteran: I got the Purple Heart (I could have had three of them), the European Theater of Operations, three battle stars, and that was it.

Interviewer: After you were injured, what happened next?

Veteran: The first thing is I didn't know anything for several days. I woke up in a tent hospital—today they call it a MASH hospital in Germany. When I woke up I was bandaged from my face down to my hips. I stayed there for about three or four days. There was a Red Cross lady that wrote a letter to my parents telling them that I was alright. See, my parents before that had got a telegram from the Defense Department saying that I was missing in action, and then they got another one saying that I was seriously wounded. This Red Cross lady wrote them that I was in a hospital but they couldn't tell them where I was at. {END OF SIDE A }

{SIDE B BEGINS} They sent me back to another MASH unit, and then they sent me to Paris, France, to a hospital there. From there they flew me to New York, and from there they flew me to Temple, Texas—McCloskey Hospital. It was an Army hospital for amputees. Another thing I forgot to tell you, our outfit spearheaded for the 7th Army, which was commanded by General Patch, and the 3rd Army which was

commanded by General Patton. We spearheaded for both of them. We did a lot of traveling at night up those mountains, and how those truck and tank drivers could see at night I never have figured that one out. Before I got hurt, we had started for Belgium for the Battle of the Bulge, but it got over before we got there. To answer your question, thought, I went to McCloskey at Temple, and the thing I always remember was they carried us to this hospital, and it had three rooms as you go in on the right. The nurses' station was on the left, and then they had a ward down there that had, gosh I don't know how many beds, but several, but one of the ambulance drivers asked Dr. Lane, who was my doctor, "Where do you want us to put him?" I never will forget this, and here I am having just turned into a man—19 or 20 years old—and he said, "Oh, just put him in one of these rooms. He's not gonna be with us very long anyway." So, that got my attention. I thought to myself, "You don't know what you're talking about. I am gonna go home eventually." I hurt so bad that they gave me pure morphine. That's the only thing that would stop that pain. I finally realized that I was asking for that morphine a little bit too regular. I thought to myself, "If I keep this up, I'm gonna get hooked on that mess," so I'd wait until I couldn't stand it no longer before I'd ask them to give me a shot. I hurt so bad that I would sweat cold sweat and wet my sheets. It hurt that bad before I'd ask for another morphine shot. If they hadn't invented morphine at that time, it would just hurt so bad that you couldn't hardly have stood it.

Interviewer: What was your parent's reaction when you got home?

Veteran: They tell a story about my mother that when she got this letter from the Red Cross that I was alive that said she was boiling a pot of beans, and she emptied the coffee pot in that pot of beans she was so excited. But when I got home, they were glad to see me. One day Dr. Lane came around and said, "You haven't been home since you got back from overseas." I said, "No, I haven't." He said, "I'll tell you what. I'm gonna give you a thirty day leave." What they had evidently planned on was to amputate that leg because it was no good. There was no feeling in it. They put me on a bus and gave this bus driver some instructions that he was to watch out for me until I got to Kirbyville. They had one telephone in the community at that time, so they called these people and told 'em to meet me there at Kirbyville at a certain time, so my uncle and my daddy met me there and they carried me home. It was in the summertime, and down there by where we lived there was a creek—Trout Creek.

When I was a kid we had a swimming hole in this creek. You've been in it, so you know how cold it is, because it's spring fed, and boy it looked good, and I wanted in it, but I was leery about getting into it with that leg like it was. One day I decided I'd try, and there was an old log across that swimming hole, so I got down there and got a-hold of that log, and I knew I could hang onto that log and my leg would float somewhat. So I got out there every day, and one day before that thirty days was over, I felt a little old bitty twinge in that leg, and that's the first time I'd felt anything since I'd got hurt, so I kept going down there every day and getting on that log. I was kicking my good foot, and finally that twinge started hurtin.' When it started hurtin,' it hurt big time, so I called back to Temple at McCloskey, and Dr. Lane said, "I don't know what you're doin' but continue, and take thirty more days." So every day that feeling would come back in it a little bit. So I called back and he said, "Take thirty more," which gave me ninety days. I went back and they shipped me over to Waco at the annex and gave me whirlpool treatments, and finally the feeling started coming back, and they didn't take my leg off. So I contribute that foot log at Trout Creek for saving my leg, and that water therapy.

Interviewer: OK, some last questions for you. From your past war experiences, what do you think about the current day wars happening?

Veteran: The war we're in right now I think is all uncalled for, and I just can't see going over there and killing all those people just because you've got big airplanes and can do it. If you go back through the history of that country over there, I don't think they'll ever completely accept democracy.

Interviewer: Do you still keep in touch with any of your ex-service members?

Veteran: Yeah, Tim Parker in Tyler. I still call him once in awhile and go see him once in awhile. He and his wife was at your grandma and my wedding. When your mother was justice of the peace, she went to school every year in Tyler, and I'd go up there and see him.

Interviewer: How did time in the service change your life?

Veteran: I've often said it made me a man before my time. It made me realize that I could not at that time do physical labor to amount to anything, so I decided the smart thing to

do was to go to college on the G.I. Bill and get an education. Eventually I got a lot stronger, and I got to where I could jog some, and I could stay in pretty good ship.

Interviewer: During battle in Germany, did you ever go to any concentration camps?

Veteran: Yes, yes.

Interviewer: What was the name of the concentration camp?

Veteran: I don't remember what the name of it was, but I went to two of 'em. The first one was a concentration camp where they had a bunch of French lady prisoners working in a cannon factory. We liberated them. Then, another one that was a gruesome sight, there were grown men in there, and the bunks were just made out of lumber. Some of 'em were starved so bad that they were just skin and bones. Now we're talking about men who were probably two hundred pounds or more before they were captured. In other words, they could not even get out of their bunks. We had to get 'em out and carry 'em to the jeeps that had stretchers on them, or on ambulances so they could take 'em back to these MASH hospitals. It was an ugly, ugly sight. But that was the two that I was involved in—those two right there.

Interviewer: The last two questions: If you could fight again, would you? And what would you say to somebody that wanted to join the military service today?

Veteran: I don't know what I'd tell 'em. I really don't. It would have to be their decision, but I feel like that that war and the war with Japan was such that if we would have let Hitler go ahead and take England—they'd already taken Italy and France, and they were in the process of taking England—and I think that was the only way to stop Adolph Hitler from eventually coming over here. You can say what you want to, but they had a well-trained army. You take a little country like Germany that could do what they did to Russia, and do what they did to France and Italy—of course, they didn't have to do too much to Italy because of Mussolini—they had to have some smart military minds, if you just stop and think about what all they did. I remember the first jet that I ever saw was a German plane, and we tried to shoot that thing down {Laughter}, and we were shooting behind it. That's just about it. Of course there's a lot of it that I can't remember right now that took place, but there was nothing fun about it. It's a nightmare that you try to forget the best you can. Of course, I still wake your grandma up sometimes hollerin'. She says I am anyway. You can take

some of the worst situations and sometimes you'll find something funny about it. We were given orders to be sure to carry our gas masks with us at all times. Of course we left them in those half-tracks, or those tanks, and some nut got out there and hollered, "Gas," and nobody could find their masks. If we could've found him, we'd have probably shot him right then, because there was no gas.

Interviewer: One last question. Did you have any relatives that fought?

Veteran: My daddy did in the first war.

Interviewer: You said he was poisoned by gas?

Veteran: Yeah, he got mustard gas. Back in that first war they used poisonous gas, but they had an agreement that no country would use gas during the second war, and I'm sure we had it ready in case it had been used on us, but we never did use it, and the Germans never did use it.

Interviewer: Did your dad warn you before you left for basic training?

Veteran: No. Only thing he ever told me was if you want to get along just follow orders, which I did.

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