Voiceover: This program is sponsored by Colonel Illinois Jennifer N. Pritzker, Illinois National Guard Retired.
Voiceover: The following is a production of the Pritzker Military Museum and Library. Bringing citizens and citizen soldiers together through the exploration of military history, topics, and current affairs, this is Pritzker Military Presents.
Clarke: Welcome to a special episode of Pritzker Military Presents with historian Edwin Bearss, recipient of the Pritzker Military Museum and Library’s 2017 Founder’s Literature Award, interviewed by Pulitzer Prize-winning historian David Hackett Fischer. I’m your host Ken Clarke, and this program along with hundreds of others covering a full range of military topics is available on demand at PritzkerMilitary.org. This interview was filmed in Bearss' home in Virginia, and features a discussion of his military service, research and authorship on the Civil War and WWII and work as chief historian of the National Park Service. Founder’s literature award recipients are selected by the Museum and Library's founder, Colonel Illinois Jennifer N. Pritzker, Illinois National Guard Retired. Bearss received this award for his immense contribution to furthering the public’s understanding of the citizen soldier and the military’s role in a democracy through a lifetime of writing and service. David Hackett Fischer is an award-winning writer, historian, and educator. He is a graduate of Princeton University and the Johns Hopkins University. Fischer is University Professor and Earl Warren Professor of History at Brandeis University in Waltham, Massachusetts, where he has served on the faculty for more than fifty years. He is the 2015 recipient of the Pritzker Literature Award for lifetime achievement in military writing. Edwin Bearss is a WWII veteran, author, and renowned authority on the American Civil War. He is a fifty-plus year veteran of military and government service. He has published nineteen books and contributed to numerous articles about the Civil War and WWII, including Fields of Honor: Pivotal Battles of the Civil War with James McPherson and Hardluck Ironclad: The Sinking and Salvage of the Cairo. During his career he has devoted much of his attention to battlefield preservation and interpretation. Bearss joined the United States Marine Corps in 1942 and served in the Pacific Theater with the 3rd Marine Raider Battalion and 1st Marine Division in the Invasion of Guadalcanal and New Britain. He then attended Georgetown University where he received a bachelor's in Foreign Service and a master's in history from Indiana University. Bearss began his career with the National Park Service in Vicksburg, Mississippi as park historian. His research there led him and two friends to the long-lost resting place of the Union gunboat Cairo and worked with the Department of the Interior to have it raised from the Yazoo River. Bearss would go on to serve as chief historian of the National Park Service and became widely known for his interpretive tours of Civil War battle sites. For his contributions to the National Park Service, Bearss was awarded the unique title of Chief Historian Emeritus. He has received a number of awards in the fields of history and preservation, including the Harry S. Truman Award for meritorious service in the field of Civil War history and Department of the Interior Distinguished Service Award among others. And now Edwin Bearss and David Hackett Fischer.
Fischer: Hello. I am David Hackett Fischer, and it's a great honor to be here to interview Ed Bearss. Ed is the recipient of the Pritzker Military Museum and Library Founder’s Literature Award. And congratulations, Ed, on your achievement.
Bearss: Well, thank you so much, because of Colonel Pritzker's interest in military history. Too much, as you would know, being much more attached to academia than I am and you can have just a limited number of colleges that make it a major effort to have military history. And I think this is wonderful being recognized by a person of the
Fischer: Well, I wonder can we talk a little bit about the experiences you have brought to your interest in history, first with your service in WWII? And I think your family's had a long history of a connection with the Marine Corps.

Bears: Yes. I had--I grew up in Montana. My grandfather's first cousin was one of the--was a Marine Corps hero beginning with the Philippine Insurrection through WWI. And his stories--he was both a recipient in the Philippine Insurrection of the Medal of Honor and one of the few marines since he commands both army and marines during WWII that becomes the recipient of the two highest awards for the navy and the army, both of them the Distinguished Corps. And as I said, my father was in the Marine Corps during WWII, but he spent it in one of the Banana Expeditions down in Haiti during that, but he was--so there's been a tradition of being in the Marine Corps. My two--two of my three children ended up in the Marine Corps. One of them, the daughter, ended up in the Marine Corps for thirteen years. The son ended up in the Marine Corps for twenty years, ended up a gunnery sergeant, and is now working as a training officer for the--in Uganda working with the Uganda Army. So it's been a long tradition in. and I was listening, like most people were, to the pro football game on the 7th day of December 1941. And the Bears were behind at the half when they broke in. They were also breaking in at Wrigley Field, where the Bears played, saying that the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. At first I was somewhat in awe. But then about two minutes later I had to go out and inform my parents of what has happened. Yes, they are bombing Pearl Harbor. Yes, I'm going to be out of here because I'm going to join the Marine Corps tomorrow morning. Then they bring up a subject that is going to throw a temporary roadblock on me. At that time you needed your parents' consent if you were eighteen years old. And my parents informed me, "Alright, if you take care of the ranch in Montana and take care of it while we go to New Orleans for vacation, we'll sign your papers when we come back." So I joined the Marine Corps on the 28th day of April 1942.

Fischer: You were in the South Pacific very quickly, weren't you?

Bears: Yes. We got out of boot camp on the 22nd day of June 1942. There had been a rather decisive turn when we went overseas. We first went to British Samoa. British Samoa had been divided in our imperialist days with some islands going to Great Britain and four islands going to the United States. So that's where we were going to do jungle training there. And then it's announced that they're going to organize the fourth--the 3rd Raider Battalion. They had already organized the 1st and 2nd Raider battalion. The 1st Raider Battalion is commanded by Red Mike Edson, a real hero. The 2nd Raider Battalion is commanded by Evans Carlson. And the 2nd Raider battalion had been engaged already, and the 1st Raider Battalion had been heavily engaged where the Japanese really are restrained at and on Guadalcanal. So a bunch of us, we kind of looked at the--if we stay in the Double Deuce, which we went overseas in, we would have been in the Double Deuce a long time. But we had a lot of gung-ho fellows like myself, so we volunteered to get in the 3rd Raider Battalion, which was commanded by Harry the Horse Liversedge. We will get in late in the Guadalcanal Campaign. We'll land at Russell Island, and that's where we'll see the first combat, but not combat-heavy like in Guadalcanal or the other places.

Fischer: But back to your service in the Marine Corps and your experience of some very horrid--of a very rough campaign at Cape Gloucester. What impact did that have on the history--

Bears: Okay, that's going to be in late January--late December and early January. Packed on--I moved on the 2nd day of January 1944. We'd been out in that area three days before and had seen no Japanese. We come up on this--moving on this level
ground. And I look there across on this—'I'm the scout, and I look across, and I see the level ground drops off at about a forty-five degree, falls down about ten yards sloping down, then hits the creek, then goes up the same way on the other side. A gentle slope and then flat ground. And I see a couple of guys that were wearing different helmets than we were. And I try to talk to the squad leader Kennedy, and he said "we're gonna talk to Lieutenant A.B. Gardner." He was a Mustang, our platoon commander. And he says--Kennedy says, "Should we open fire?" And he says, "Yes." So we open fire, but we did not know about five yards downslope, there is going to be the main Japanese defense line. Then I'm sitting down on my haunches, and the guy hits me first right here. Cuts the radial nerve, shatters the left elbow, and fortunately it isn't a Nambu, 'cause the next shot probably would have got me right here. But it is a Hotchkiss. It's gonna hit me here in the top of the shoulder, shatters my right shoulder joint, and lodges between the seventh and eighth rib, stays on the inside of the ribcage, but doesn't hit any of the soft tissue in there, which is the lungs. And they then go down the line knocking off others. They've got us pinned down. The colonel does nothing. That's Colonel Williams. And they'll send up--after about two hours they'll send up Puller, who is the executive officer. He'll take over. And by that time, they've stopped the 3rd Battalion 7th and the 3rd Battalion 5th, and we haven't made any gain at all. They then will go back to try to gain more casualties. I evidentially am moving around somewhat, 'cause I look to a guy, Bailey. Bailey's behind a tree. And I said "Bailey, if you--my helmet,"--'that's why I'm wearing the hat--the iron piss pot was down like that. And having both arms disabled I cannot get it up. And finally I see a log, and I say, "Bailey, take your rifle, hold your rifle at the buttstock, and see if you can hit my helmet and knock it back like that." He does it. And then I start to get up again, and that's the only time I used profanity on them--they shoot at me again. They hit me here, carries the side of my boodocker off and part of my heel off. Then the embarrassing shot gets its--a very close to me, probably cut about--about an inch in the place right across the cheek of your butt where you don't want to be shot. Then I finally--Sidestedder and I tried to cooperate. He grabbing me by the ankles, since he can't use his hands and I can't use my arms, and maybe between the two of us we can turn ourselves around, but it doesn't work. And that's probably when the Japanese shoots back at me there. Then I get finally up at the top, and a corpsman comes up, and the lieutenant comes up--O'Leary--and I'm glad to see him. Now it's a mess up here on the level ground. One of our corpsman is dead there. The machine gunner's knocked out of action. The Japanese are doing a good job on us, and our two BR men are both killed.

Fischer: And some other marines in your unit worked very hard at getting you to safety. Is that correct?

Bearss: Yup. So if it hadn't been for Lieutenant O'Leary and Florman Hartman, probably Kennedy would have died, I would have died, and another guy would have died, because they got us out of there. So they finally give me a couple of shots of morphine, 'cause I couldn't get into my medical kit. Both arms are broken. And they'll grab me on my back--so they'll pull those dungarees that marines wear, and they pull me back to where the medics can get to me.

Fischer: And then it was along road back, wasn't it?

Bearss: Yes, it was a long road back, 'cause I get back to the sick bank. Now if I had known as much as I do now about colonel Letterman and his reforms, I would have probably calculated my chance of survival are pretty good, 'cause they got to me really early, they've given me--they've cut me here and here so they're giving me two bottles of plasma at the same time. They cannot give you--they cannot give you a blood transfusion until you get back to the regimental hospital, 'cause they have to worry about the type of that. So they give me the transfusions of those. They pull all my clothes off
me, and they pack your wound, your wounds, the two penetration wounds, they pack
them with Vaseline gauze, 'cause they want the wound to dry from the inside out. And I
know from statistics if you reach the battalion aid station in WWII--I learned that long
afterwards when I become, like you and I are, readers. I read those things. I didn't know
that if you reach the battalion aid station and get into the Letterman policy, which is still
the same way of evacuating wounded, I would have--well, I would have died of
gangrene. 'Cause if they amputated just my big toe, three percent are gonna die. If they
cut you here, seventeen percent are gonna die. And it gets higher as it gets up here.
And the total number--we didn't have Letterman and his reforms, what he does, the dead
from--the dead, if you reach the battalion aid station regardless of where you are in
Europe, five percent of you are going to live. And ninety-five percent are gonna die.
Fischer: And then from this long recovery that you had, you decide--you went back to
school on the GI Bill. Is that right?
Bearss: Yes. My recovery started--Letterman said you went from your regimental aid
station to an evacuation hospital for a week in Oro Bay New Guinea, then another
evacuation hospital in Papua New Guinea for a week, and then three months to the
42nd General Hospital, then back to the United States. So when I get back in the United
States, I arrive at San Francisco, where if they're gonna amputate. 'Cause all
amputations and fixing apotheosis by the navy are done on the west coast at Mare
Island Hospital. So I'm very happy because I'm there a month. End of June, they'll
interview me, have a chaplain there, have a person that specializes in what you could do
to make yourself useful to the general public. And they decide they can save my arms.
Because I actually drive the car with this arm, not this one. So I'm sent to San Diego
Naval Hospital. Then there are two--this is very important--there are two GI Bills. One
was Public Law XVI, passed for people severely wounded in WWI. Then there's the GI
Bill, published by principally a lady from Massachusetts and a hardcore segregationist
from Mississippi, that will be the GI Bill. But under Public Law XVI--that's why they'll have
a psychiatrist there, they will--if I had told them then what I know later, I would have got--
they would have sent me to school. If I put down that I wanted to teach in college, they
would have funded my college all the way, as long as my work was satisfactory, to a
Ph.D. GI--the GI Bill only got the equivalent of your time in service. So that--so what I
decide to--I use the GI Bill to go to Georgetown. Then since if I used Public Law XVI, I
would have used it to also go to Indiana to get a Ph.D. But when I get to Indiana I find
out it's--your tuition at Indiana at that time was three, five dollars a credit hour if you live
in the state. And my parents then lived in Indiana, so that's why I ended up getting my
MA from Indiana. But if I'd been thinking ahead--although you could even then, if you're
gonna be a doctor or more things--so I picked that because you and I both know that
academic degrees--so that sends me to school.
Fischer: But then there are other parts of the story as you got into the National Park
Service.
Bearss: Alright. Alright. Let's go back to Indiana University. I got my master's degree in
January 1946. And I wrote--my thesis was on Patrick Cleburne, but I decided I better go
and visit the battlefield where he fought. 'Cause I went back to my experiences on the
day I got shot, how I could have done it differently and not been shot. So I go in, and I'm
very lucky. I arrive there late on a day they usually close at five. Pete Shed was the park
historian. I didn’t know they had park historians at these sites. And Pete says, "Why
don't you come back tomorrow morning, and we'll walk the battlefield together." I said,
"Good." So I go and rent a room in not a bed and breakfast, but a tourist home that's
down in economic scale. So I'm out there, and by mid-morning we had visited all the
sites that Cleburne was. Then Shed brings up the subject. He says, "I suppose you're
one of these people that comes through Shiloh, and will tell that are convinced that if
Albert Sidney Johnson had not been killed, the Confederates would have won the battle, they would have driven the Union Army into the cul-de-sac formed by the Snake Creek and the Tennessee River?" I said, "Yes. All the Confederates say they would." "Well," he said, "since you were in the Marine Corps and have been shot at and hit, let's go for a walk." And this two-hour walk made me a believer that you have to know the terrain. So we walked. We leave the place where Johnston was mortally wounded. They have a tree there where he might have been—at least that's where the governor of Tennessee found him sitting his horse. So Johnston is now dead. Now the theory is if Beauregard had taken command, which he does, he would have followed up what Johnston had done. He would have driven the Yankees into that cul-de-sac between Snake Creek and Dill Branch, and that would be all you ever heard of US Grant. So we walk, and it's open. We walk by Bloody Pond. It's very level. It's been a union camp for a month—denser there. Then we come to Dill Branch. Alright. There's the Tennessee River. It's gonna run in a course generally from that way, that way, over this way. Dill Branch runs at right angles to it. It's only a mile and a quarter long. It would flow into the Tennessee River there. It has very steep banks. So Shed and I had to get on our--slide down the bank on our butt. We came to Dill Branch, and the water's too deep to ford. Higher up it might not be. Meanwhile the Union reinforcements are arriving on the high ground right over there. So the Confederates have two regiments. They know the enemy is landing, and they know the terrain makes it impossible for them to cross Dill Branch. Now General Grant will spend a great deal of time on when he takes command of the 21st Illinois. He marches them all the way from Springfield over to where he crosses the river at Hannibal. East of Hannibal he comes up against troops that are obviously Missouri State Guard. And Grant lacks for the only--this is where Grant learns his most important lesson. He spends a whole chapter on it. He loses his nerve, and he doesn't attack the enemy. The next morning he advances, and the enemy is gone. That has taught him that the importance of moral courage—moral courage is taking advantage of your worries and things, different than physical courage. It's a lot more important for a general to have moral courage than physical courage.

Fischer: And so it's--
Bearss: --Because he finds the Confederates had fled.
Fischer: And so it sounds as if that terrain walk with Shed--
Bearss: Yes.
Fischer: --was the beginning of a career for you.
Bearss: It was the beginning of a career because in the morning of the 21st, of the--on Sunday morning, both McPherson and Sherman advise him to retreat. He tells one of them, "We will attack, and tonight we'll sleep in our tents tonight." So that's—again the man that's the most important general in the army has learned that lesson. And if you read that first chapter about—if you don't pay attention to it, you don't realize what had just happened--
Fischer: How important that was--
Bearss: And I think they—if he'd not had that moral courage, he would have done the same thing that Joe Hooker did and other fellows had done. So that—and that showed me the importance of terrain, both on the rank and file and for the big chiefs.
Fischer: And leading you to a career of many other battlefield walks.
Bearss: Many others, 'cause it's a fact of life. It's gonna follow him all the way to--
Fischer: --in military history and history in general.
Bearss: The most important moment of Grant's life is at the intersection, as you mentioned. And that's where I discuss the fires. That's where the Orange Plank Road--the Orange Plank Road crosses the road going to—going south and east to the courthouse. And the only one Confederate think he might do it, and that's General Lee.
Fischer: Yup.

Bearss: All the other Confederates are sure he's going to--and all the Yankees are sure he's going back across the North Anna—the South Anna River, just like Burnside had done, just like whoever had done.

Fischer: And you have written about this and led many a group over that ground.

Bearss: Yes, because that's--and he's gonna do it all through the campaign. And that's why it's gonna end up in Appomattox Courthouse and Wilmer McLean's--

Fischer: With your career at the National Park Service you began to work on problems of this sort all over the country, I think we could say. And also many of them in military history, but many not, right?

Bearss: Yes. In 1985, Secretary of the Army Marsh, who represented the Shenandoah Valley, got interested in again adding the staff ride to the curriculum at West Point and to other units throughout the army.

Fischer: I didn't know that General Marshall lost interest in staff, whereas--I learned it from you.

Bearss: He lost interest because he stepped over that in thinking of the big picture, without realizing this is the most important picture. And they will--Marsh will then meet with me, and he said, "Will you lead a staff ride, such as they used to do it on horseback? But we're going to do it from a helicopter and walking." And he gives me a lieutenant colonel because we're going to fly from the Pentagon up to Manassas. They've got permission to land five helicopters at Manassas. So, and it's in mid-May. They pick me up at the Pentagon. Now the other ones are going to-- the four interesting people that are going to be important on this ride are going to be Marsh, the chief of staff General Wickham--who is the next-to-last veteran of WWII that is chief of staff. Vuono will be the last to be chief of staff that fought in WWII. And then there is Mad Max Thurman, who is viewed as the Jesuit of the army. The believed truthfully if the army wanted you to have a wife, they would have issued you the wife. And that's also important. And then the chief of civilian--the assistant chief of the army was Ambrose.

The first thing the five helicopters--

Fischer: Stephen Ambrose, yeah--

Bearss: Only four of them have communication back and forth. Those are the four that have the black box, which is the chief--Marsh, Ambrose, Wickham, and Thurman were flying up. So we get out, and we walk it. And when we get--they land up there near the--near the visitor's center, and they walked down to the sunken road. I'd never been asked this question before. Wickham says, "I'm chief of staff. I can go to the 102nd, I can go to the 82nd, I can go to the Rangers and tell them to advance shoulder to shoulder in two ranks, and they would laugh at me today. I'm gonna ask you a question--why did they do it then, and I can't do it now?" And he said, "I'll even add a council to it. I can go to the chief of naval operations and ask him for the SEALS, 'cause they're the most gung-ho of any, and they would have laughed at me."

And I--well, this becomes an academic question. Now first off, I knew that there were far more real belief that there was life after death in those days than there was in the Civil War. I also knew that since people didn't move about, you might have a papa and a number of sons or relatives. So they would be all from--unless they're from New York or Chicago or some big city, they're from a very small community. That means they know everybody. And they're related heavily, and can you really go home if you bug out? And all these other fellows hadn't bugged out. Well, he said, "Well, that's interesting, but you haven't really convinced me." Then I made a horrible mistake. I did not look at the insignia of the rank of their branch of service. Then we get up at the Maryland monument where we're gonna have lunch. And I say to them, "We only had four branches of the service then: infantry, cavalry, and artillery, and the rest were staff positions. And the artillery generally had to be,"-- since I
was always lousy in mathematics, I said, "Artillery particularly as they evolved further and further, they've got to know hard mathematics. They got to know trigonometry. And so generally you want a brighter man as an officer in an artillery unit and--than you would need for an infantry unit or a cavalry unit." So Thurman, the hard man, gets up and applauds. Two other officers with cross cannon get up and applaud. William gets up with his cross rifles and said, "Ed, Bearss, you shot yourself in the foot. I was in the infantry in Italy." He threw Italy in because Italy is the best place you're gonna be a casualty if you're in WWII. You're gonna have a higher percent of casualties in Italy than in any other place. So I found as they instituted. And so has the Marine Corps heard about it. General Gray is the new commandant of the Marine Corps. Marine Corps usually has a hard line commandant and then a not-so-hard line. Gray is hardline, and he immediately adopts the staff right for the Marine Corps. Fischer: So you've been doing these tours, battlefield tours and staff rides for almost every major conflict in American history and some beyond American history as well. And what has been particularly successful in terms of reaching people and engaging them in the subject?

Bearss: I find to reach the subject to them when you get them on the ground--when they're standing on the ground and where key events have taken place, and to focus on decisions that are made there. Like you have to understand signals slots on the situation of Meade's orders to extend his left flank down to Little Round Top. You cannot understand what goes wrong until you're on the ground. When you go out to the peach orchard there where the Millerstown road crosses the Emmitsburg Road, you can see that he's established a salient angle. You then turn back to what the people in Hancock's corps, the 2nd Corps is saying, because they're saying much different when they see those troops moving out there to take that position at the angle ter. They're saying some of the officers say, "What gallantry, what gallantry they move out there." Others will say, "Just wait a moment. They'll come tumbling back much faster." That shows there's a difference of opinion in Meade's 5th Corps of what Sickles has done or not done. And I think once you get out that and particularly when you're on Little Round Top, you're going to see the different—you're gonna see how important the site where Warren is standing, where he can see the Confederate advance. He can see Hood's men stepping out of the woods there, and you can follow in how the different people are reacting to each.

Fischer: Well, my impression is that as you have led professional military officers around, and I have done some of that myself, that they are very attentive to how decisions are made and to the conditions within--and I think that it was somebody said once that, "Some folks are weather-wise, and some folks are otherwise." And you can say some folks are terrain-wise, and some folks are otherwise.

Bearss: Yes. And as you know, and if you walk the field, you realize that it's better to be terrain-wise than weather wise, 'cause that's going to decide. Now on terrain-wise, if Oates hadn't sent a company of men down to capture those Union wagons, would that company of men enabled him to turn Chamberlain's position?

Fischer: And I have a feeling that when people are making decisions about all sorts of problems--in politics, in business, in daily affairs--

Bearss: Yes.

Fischer: --that there are lots of analogs to the sorts of decisions that are made in battle. And there are lots of parallels between terrain issues and other issues that frame our political choices, for example.

Bearss: And of course you've got to know how Lincoln's mind is functioning. Like Lincoln--Meade should have had a public relations man on his staff, just like they do now. He would have known that you don't issue a general order congratulating your men
on winning an important battle and call on them for future exertion to drive the invader from our soil. Just those phrases put Meade in a bad light with the most important man in the government. Drive them by my soil. According to Hay, and Hay it is that Meade— that Lincoln blows his top, talking just like General McClellan. And that would be— all you would have to give him is a PR man, that could be improved.

Fischer: I often feel also that when I'm working with the young people today, and we're talking about things historical, and if they talk about that in a way that's removed from the setting, removed from the terrain, removed from the context, it's very difficult for them to engage those questions. They don't have a lot of meaning. But if you set them—if you take them to a discussion of those questions, all the terrain, and there are lots of parallels to that with teaching of all sorts of questions, then we can engage them in a way that goes much beyond what's possible without that sense of immediacy.

Bearss: Like on the 12th Meade schedules an attack on two bridge ends to Williamsport and at Falling Waters. And the gets some questions raised by some of these corps commanders. And he calls a council of war. And a council of war generally is going to take the weak position. And then of course the president blows his top and wrote a letter, and thank God he didn't send it. He wrote this famous message: "You had him in your hand. All you did was have to close it." So you can second-guess— you can have everybody second-guessing that decision.

Fischer: A fair amount of your work has been in the National Park Service preserving the ground on which these--

Bearss: The park service—you don't really need the park service if it isn't for preserving the battleground to see what the lessons are, because you can get it— if the ground means nothing, you can just get rid of the battlefields and read a book.

Fischer: Right. But there's a better way--

Bearss: And you know as well as I do, you can tell if the person's writing a book--

Fischer: --has been there--

Bearss: If he knows the terrain.

Fischer: Yeah. For sure, I think that's--

Bearss: You can tell right off hand if the person has been there.

Fischer: Yup. And then I think of what the Pritzker Library and Museum tries to do. They are trying to build a first-class place for the study of history, but they also are very interested in the work that you've been doing.

Bearss: Yes, I think the Pritzker Museum and their scope of collection statements and what they adhere to answers the big need that they have for making use of these wonderful sites that have been preserved to take what the theories, read about the references at the Pritzker Library, and then go out and walk the battlefield.

Fischer: And they think of themselves as the Pritzker Library and Museum, so they want to work with artifacts as well as with--

Bearss: Artifacts become very important.

Fischer: And then on my visits out there they also are engaging people with military experience in the teaching of young people in Chicago.

Bearss: Yes.

Fischer: At every level. And that seems to get a— make an impact.

Bearss: Yeah because it's important to have journals. Now the Civil War is wonderful, because people kept journals and wrote letters. WWII, if you kept a diary, you were in serious problems with the authorities. If you go all the way into— when they're going with severe punishment, they always go to the biggest punishment and then work down. We were told when we went overseas, "Do not take a camera, and do not keep a diary." And they were told— several people did. They never got caught. They became popular with
people who wanted copies of pictures in their diaries later on. And if they had been caught they would have been in serious problems.

Fischer: I think of the work that you have done and of the way you have draw on a lot of unwritten experience, the experience that--of your own service in WWII. The experience that you’ve had in a career of working with the battlefields, the sites, the terrain, the materials, the surviving relics of these wars, and putting all of that to work as tools for helping other people to learn from these things.

Bearss: So I look between--I don’t urge you to go and get your expertise by going and getting yourselves shot, but I think it makes you better because you’re aware of what will happen to you. You’re aware, like as I said, I was very down in the dumps, and I only wish I had known about Letterman long before I knew about Letterman, and I had been a lot more comfortable when I arrived in the regimental hospital.

Fischer: But still from what you have done, I think the rest of us can be very thankful for the process.

Bearss: Well, that's what I--that's why I'm both glad I lived through it and I--

Fischer: And still working away.

Bearss: Still working away. And I told one time, we got a director of the park service, an assistant director. And I said to him, "Mr. Coates, why are you reading this reading to us? And if it's going worrying about report to Congress, you get to read it, and make-- if you say the wrong date you can correct it." So I say, “You cannot excite the members of Congress for a project unless you address them verbally." You'd--I --and that's why the senators--in fact the senator from New Mexico, senate chairman of the Appropriations Committee sent a message over. He wanted me to testify in favor of the park that they were creating near, in New Mexico. Because he wanted me because I talk—to give it like I'm talking to you.

Fischer: I think of the many thousands of people you have taken on your tours, and they keep coming back for more, right.

Bearss: Yeah, they wouldn't come back.

Fischer: And even more than that, you are now ninety-four, I think. Is that correct?

Bearss: Yes.

Fischer: And you are working your way into the history of WWI planning a tour that will be coming up in the hundredth anniversary of that great--

Bearss: Now the strange thing was, they--on April 6th, they wanted somebody to talk about the declaration of war. And they could not find anybody from WWI, 'cause they're all gone, so they got me as a second choice because I was an old person from WWII. And they then had a--they then had the gifted students then took what I said and made an audio-visual to show at the schools at Arlington County.

Fischer: I also had the feeling that for you, that history is always a process of inquiring. That I think you and I are of the oldest school of history, the school of Herodotus, who gave us the word history that meant inquiry in Greek.

Bearss: Yes.

Fischer: And for you these things are always open inquiries. It's--there's a kind of life that comes from that very open process that you talk about--

Bearss: And that's why I loved your books. To return the compliment I didn’t really know anything of detail in that eleven-day period, the most important period of the Revolution. You came out with your book, and it was--

Fischer: Well, I'm learning from you on every war in American history, and now I'm looking forward to learning about WWI from you in this new work that you’re doing, and I wish you--
Bearss: So I think--I'm glad that we have the Pritzker Museum reinforcing what you and I have been thinking and talking about for a long time.
Fischer: Well, it's been a pleasure.
Bearss: Thank you so much.
Clarke: Thank you to Edwin Bearss and to David Hackett Fischer for an outstanding discussion and to Colonel Jennifer N. Pritzker for sponsoring this program. To learn more about the 2017 Founder's Literature Award or the Pritzker Military Museum and Library, visit in person or online at PritzkerMilitary.org. Thank you, and please join us next time on *Pritzker Military Presents*.
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