

Bobby E. Southard

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Interviewed by Jerrod Howe

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Howe: My name is Jerrod Howe, and we are here today at Lake Barrington Wood. April 12th—Saturday, April 12th, 2014. And I am here with... Bobby Southard?

Southard: Mm Hm.

Howe: And we're here to get your story of service.

Southard: Okay.

Howe: So. Thanks for coming out today. We're...if you don't mind, we'll start at the very beginning for you.

Southard: Okay.

Howe: Where and when were you born?

Southard: I was born in Indiana in 1923.

Howe: Okay.

Southard: Anderson? You know anything about the towns in Indiana?

Howe: How close is that to a major city?

Southard: Indianapolis.

Howe: Okay.

Southard: About twenty-five minutes.

Howe: Alright. What did your parents do for a living?

Southard: My dad was a factory worker, and we lived on an eleven-acre farm—or truck patch, whatever you want to call it. We had an apple orchard with about fifty apple trees. And we always cultivated in between the rows of trees, and that's where we planted all of our garden.

Howe: Nice. What did your mother do?

Southard: Housewife.

Howe: Okay.

Southard: That's rare today. [Laughs].

Howe: Everybody works today, yeah. Did you have any siblings?

Southard: I had a brother and a sister.

Howe: Okay.

Southard: Sister: older; and a brother: younger.

Howe: How many—how many years?

Southard: My sister was—I was eleven months behind her, and my brother was three years behind me.

Howe: Okay, so what was it like growing up in Indiana? And this is...what we know as today, during the Great Depression.

Southard: Mm hm.

Howe: What was that like?

Southard: Well, dad worked at Delco Remy, so he always had a job. We didn't have money like we do today, to throw away, but we never went hungry. We always—well, we had enough garden there that Mom...I don't know. There was always a hundred and some jars of stuff she'd put up every summer or spring so... We lived what I thought at that time, was a comfortable life. Now, I wouldn't think so today because living on eleven acres and...see I was trying to remember what kind of car dad had...I don't even remember. We eventually got an Auburn? No. One of the older European models, and I went to high school in Ale[xander]—not Anderson. Most people where we lived went to Anderson. It was a bigger high school. But I—we'd always lived in the country. So I didn't like

crowds, so Alexander was much smaller, and I thought a lot more friendly. I had friends in Anderson, but I liked what—the small—smallness in going to Alexander. I knew more people, and got acquainted with them.

Howe: And this was during high school?

Southard: Mm?

Howe: This was during your high school years?

Southard: Yeah.

Howe: Okay. What were some of your interests during that time? Academics? Athletics?

Southard: Just taking care of the cow, the pigs, the horse...taking care of the farm 'cause my dad worked 5:00 to 1:30, so he slept most of the day. So I always had to take care of everything. And I did since I was about eight years old.

Howe: And your siblings obviously helped...

Southard: My sister never did. My brother did later on. But my sister, every time they wanted her to do something, she was sick. She didn't feel good. She hurt, so she was able to get out. I used to tell 'em she's puttin' on, but they would be... [Laughs]. It made me more conscious of when I raised my three kids.

Howe: [Laughs].

Southard: There was nobody got away with that kind of stuff.

Howe: Fair enough.

Southard: Because, you know, it's crazy when you stop and think about it. And it's not proper for the family, so... All of our kids worked when they were going to school. Basically, in high school, before they went to college.

Howe: Wow...wow. Was anyone in your family, or anyone that you were close to as you were growing up, had they served in the military?

Southard: No.

Howe: Okay. So then, are you the first member in your family to have joined?

Southard: [non-verbal response, nodding.]

Howe: Alright. What made you decide to volunteer?

Southard: Well, everybody was going, and I guess you just kind of felt left out, and all of my friends, well, most of them were drafted. I volunteered because I liked airplanes, and I thought I'd volunteer in the [US] Air Force, but...never was inside of an airplane the whole time I was there.

Howe: You were with the Infantry Division.?

Southard: Mm, hm.

Howe: Okay.

Southard: I went into the Air Force.

Howe: Right.

Southard: But I took training on the B—the...can't think of...it'll come to me. Bomb Sight Sperry. Sperry Bomb Sight. And that was real secretive. In fact, the FBI checked our family out before they let me going into that Sperry Bomb Sight.

Howe: Right.

Southard: So, in those days, that was a secret and you didn't talk about it with anybody, and you were very cautious about it. But, you know, it wasn't long 'til that become commonplace, every place, so...

Howe: Sure.

Southard: The secrets are all cut out—and of course it was complicated. That was the thing that was most amazing to me. The average person—if he had it, he wouldn't know what to do with it, or how to use it.

Howe: Right...Right. But, before we get to that, you said your friends were going. You decided that you wanted to join up so that you weren't missing out. Where did, where did you go to enlist?

Southard: Indianapolis.

Howe: Okay, and how long before you enlisted were you shipped off to Basic Training?

Southard: Immediately.

Howe: Okay... no waiting time. Within a week?

Southard: Yes.

Howe: Alright. And where did you do your Basic Training at?

Southard: Florida.

Howe: What was that like?

Southard: Miserable.

Howe: [Laughs].

Southard: Those were nutty people. They wouldn't have anything to do with the soldiers. I was—I said I'd never go back to Florida because I did find some good people down there, but at the time, they left...a bad taste in your mouth, having to associate with them.

Howe: You're talking about the local residents?

Southard: Yes.

Howe: What was Basic Training like?

Southard: Just typical of the [US] Army.

Howe: Right.

Southard: In other words, all kind of exercises and learning to take care of your equipment. You had to know how to take care of gun—'course, I was in the Air Force, and primarily my job was to work on that bomb sight and repair it, to keep it going.

Howe: Sure.

Southard: So, that's where I spent most of my time. And I was so, I guess, fascinated by that bomb [sight] that I used to go and check one out on my own, and

take it apart just to make sure I knew how to take care of it, because it was a complicated piece of equipment.

Howe: Hm...so, I wanna draw a distinction, for clarity purposes...this is about the time that the Army split between the Army and the Air Force, right? So you joined the Army and then--?

Southard: No. I went into the Air Force.

Howe: You went into the Air Force. So the Air Force was already established.

Southard: Yes.

Howe: You enlist in the Air Force. Okay. That helps...trying to delineate when that division occurred, but... So, after Basic Training you—how was your job in the military determined?

Southard: Ooohh. Let me think what they did. [Pause] Well, I—see the problem is, I didn't stay in the Air Force too long because I wanted to go overseas, and after I graduated from Bomb Site maintenance, they wouldn't send me overseas with that. I had to stay in the States. So, I said, "No dice." And I volunteered for the infantry. So they transferred me to the infantry, and I took Basic Training, and they sent me over to Europe.

Howe: Okay. So you were first—you came in, did Basic Training. And then you went and did training on the Sperry, the Sperry Equipment?

Southard: Mm hm.

Howe: Describe that process. First of all, what is the—you said it's a bomb.

Southard: Bomb Site.

Howe: Bomb Sight. Okay.

Southard: In other words, that—when a pilot goes to bomb on a bombing run, that thing is turned over to the Bomb Sight. It flies it. He keeps his hands off of things, and let's that Bomb Site fly the plane.

Howe: Okay.

Southard: So, the Bomb Sight has complete control of everything. And you just figure out what you're going, and where you wanna go, and when you wanna drop the bombs, and it all does automatically.

Howe: So this is a piece of sighting equipment that has guidance and controls over the plane?

Southard: Mm hm.

Howe: So you're basically flying the plane for a short period of time.

Southard: Yeah. [Giggles].

Howe: Wow. Very cool.

Southard: It never seemed to have control of the plane though. [Laughs]. But it was amazing how when they first brought that thing out, it was so sensitive that it would almost tear a plane apart. Because a plane couldn't vary a half inch before that Bomb Site come in and straighten it up. So, they had to rework that Bomb Site because they were going to tear up planes!

Howe: Sure.

Southard: And if you went into combat, and got some shells up under one of 'em, and that thing reversed, you'd be in serious trouble, so...

Howe: Right.

Southard: So, they had to learn to adjust the plane—or the Bomb Site—

Howe: It was—

Southard: To let the plane—

Howe: It was too well-engineered.

Southard: Yeah.

Howe: Wow. So, this was—how long were you in this job before you were transferred to Infantry?

Southard: Well, let me see...I went through the training, and I taught one class about the Bomb Site. That, they needed bomb sight people—trainers—and I didn't want to be a trainer. And it was stupid—I coulda had, the war made instead in Denver, the rest of the time if I had just taught people. But I taught one class. And the captain tried his best to get me

to stay 'cause he wanted...well, I always tried...I was taught if you're gonna do anything, do it right.

Howe: Hm.

Southard: So, I was always careful about doing things correct, and taking care, and I always took good care of equipment. So, I guess I was kind of a good example, in a way, for that...

Howe: And that's why they wanted you as an instructor.

Southard: Yeah.

Howe: Okay.

Southard: And... [Laughs]. It was funny, my first class, I went through this rigmorole—I don't remember what it was a name for—'bout fifteen minutes...and I'd looked up, and they didn't have any idea what I had said. So, I stopped and called the sergeant in, and I said, "I messed 'em up. They don't even know what it's all about." [Laughs]. But he thought that was comical. But anyway, he helped me straighten 'em out because when you're talking about something as complicated as that, and you're talking to people that don't have any idea what it is...and it, it's really hard to get your head wrapped around it.

Howe: Right.

Southard: 'Cause that thing is very, very complicated. Well, has to be if it's gonna fly that airplane.

Howe: Sure. Which is—I guess it's relevant now to explain that portion of it. In your opinion, I mean, the goal of this equipment was...what, exactly? What kind of, what things is it putting together, for what reason? Why would they build something like this?

Southard: Because they wanted to be able to drop the bombs exactly where they wanted 'em.

Howe: Okay.

Southard: And you can't do it by sight. You're traveling two hundred miles an hour and you think, 'Well, now how long's—many seconds it gonna take me to get there?' And you've got all kinds of crazy things that you can't work out in your head. So the Bomb Site took all of this into...condition. Side

winds. If you were going halfway against the wind, you took this idea into it. And it took the difference in speed of winds, and so you tried to line it up so the bombs always fell where you wanted 'em to. And we still made mistakes.

Howe: How does the...how does a class work? When you're, when you're teaching a class?

Southard: Well, you take this Bomb Site, and you take it all apart and put it on the bench, and then you start putting it back together, and tell 'em how each part works, and—see, they were going someplace to an air base where bomb sites would be worked on.

Howe: Mm hm.

Southard: So, they had to know exactly how to take care of it.

Howe: Okay.

Southard: And that bomb site, at that time, was the most complicated thing in the country.

Howe: Mostly classroom training?

Southard: Mm Hm.

Howe: And you said that you'd never been in an airplane?

Southard: Not to fly—

Howe: Okay.

Southard: During the service.

Howe: Sure. Sure.

Southard: Because you had to have some place like this to work on the Bomb Site. You couldn't work on it in the airplane.

Howe: Right.

Southard: So, my job is to repair it if it wasn't working right, and make sure it dropped 'em where it was supposed to.

Howe: I just find it so odd how integral this piece of equipment is, and how important your job to maintaining that is, and yet they won't take you up for a ride. They won't let you see it in action.

Southard: Uh huh.

Howe: Happens all the time, huh?

Southard: Yeah.

Howe: Okay.

Southard: And during the—I found the service very narrow-minded. I didn't get along too well 'cause I was always asking why, and they didn't like questions.

Howe: They like to get the job done, they don't, they don't necessarily want to have to explain themselves all the time.

Southard: But, my thought was, if you tell me what it is, and how it works, and the reason for it, then I could do a better job. And that's what I tried to tell my people. When I trained them, I didn't just train them to fix a Bomb Sight. I trained them about taking care of it, and how to fix it if something went wrong with it. But if they flew over a target, and they missed it by a half a mile, I wanted to know about it because it was something wrong, someplace, or you wouldn't miss something like that.

Howe: Right.

Southard: So...

Howe: And the fun part about that is...it might be a mechanical error, it might be a human error.

Southard: It could very well be.

Howe: Yeah.

Southard: Well, primarily when that Bomb Sight takes control of the plane, the pilot lets go. He has no control. It's controlled strictly by the Bomb Sight.

Howe: How big is it?

Southard: [Makes hand gesture]. 'Bout like that. Not very big. [Laughs].

Howe: Did it have its own seat, and gets buckled in, and wears a cap?

Southard: No. [Laughs].

Howe: Yeah.

Southard: No.

Howe: So, talk a little bit more about your transition from... I had the MOS number down. I don't have that anymore. From being a Bomb Sight Operator and Mechanic to working with the 66th Infantry Division.

Southard: Well, because they were gonna keep me there as a teacher, and I didn't want that. I wanted to go overseas. I was crazy. But, nevertheless, that's what I wanted to do. And the only way I could do is get out of the Air Force. So that's the reason I, well, I had to go to college to—the only way I could get out of the Air Force was to go to college. They had a college training program. So I went to college in Columbia, Missouri for one semester, and then they closed it all down and took care of it. Then, I went into the Infantry. And I went overseas in the Infantry, but I never saw...well, I got shot at, where I...artillery, a couple of times, but I never got into any combat to amount to anything at all.

Howe: The 66[th Infantry Division] was stationed ...where? They—you guys were?

Southard: Down south someplace. Black Panther Division.

Howe: Right...they initially were in the European theatre for a bit?

Southard: Yeah.

Howe: Where did, where was it that you ended up joining them?

Southard: What did I do there?

Howe: Where did you join up with them?

Southard: Oh. I went to England, and we were sent across to France to join the Battle of the Bulge. But we had one of our troop ships torpedoed and we lost 1,100 men. And the reason was because the crew of the ship abandoned ship when it was torpedoed. And they just forgot about our

men. And, of course, they didn't have any idea how to get off the ship and what to do. And 1,100 of them...died.

Howe: Hm.

Southard: So, my company, or Division was no longer fit to go into combat. You can't take a 11 or 12,000-men Division, and take a thousand out of it, and expect it to operate. You're just losing too many things. So they sent us over to England and into France. And that's where the troop ship sank the men. So I sat on a Air Force for thirty days. They didn't know what to do with us because we couldn't go into combat with a shortage of people, so... They finally decided that we should go to Austria and guard the war chronic—War Criminal Stockade. So, I was transferred to Salsberg, Austria, and that's a beautiful country, by the way.

Howe: Hm.

Southard: And...was there until the end of the war.

Howe: About how long were you there for?

Southard: Two, probably two and a half years.

Howe: Wow. Okay.

Southard: 'Cause I went in in '44, well, no. Not quite that long. But I was there at least a year and a half.

Howe: The—

Southard: We've been back there several times.

Howe: Really?

Southard: We love that country, down there in Austria.

Howe: How— I mean, that's a whole host of questions. Um...[Laughs]. So the transition from Air Force to Army, was it a...pretty much a paperwork exercise? Or did you have significant training to cover?

Southard: Well, I had had Basic Training, but when I went into the Infantry, they gave me re-basic training, which was altogether different than the Air Force.

Howe: Sure.

Southard: Because they trained you for combat, and the Air Force, you were just working on the airplanes.

Howe: Right.

Southard: So you had a difference in that.

Howe: Got to learn how to march. Got to learn how to shoot.

Southard: Yeah.

Howe: Got it. So, then, by the time you meet up with the 66th, it's pretty late in the war.

Southard: Yeah. I was trying to remember this, when we went overseas, and how long it was. My memory's not that good anymore. [Laughs].

Howe: That's quite alright. My questions aren't that good, so we're about on par. We're working on it. [Laughs]. What was it like...you said that you enjoyed Austria...

Southard: Mm hm.

Howe: The Allied Forces occupied this territory at the time. What was it like living and working there?

Southard: The people were friendly. Of course, they didn't have enough food, and that's what they wanted. They were friends because they wanted food. But the Austrian people, I thought, were very nice, and we've been back on, three times, I think, to spend down in that area. Because we met—I met people there that we stayed friends with throughout our time. I don't go back any more, but I—we've made three trips. I took my wife over, and she got to meet some of the people that I had, well, lived with some times.

Howe: Wow.

Southard: Because they kept soldiers...we didn't, you know, a big camp to work out of...so we stayed in—lot of times—stayed in homes for temporary things.

Howe: So, then, where did you go to the...place where they were being held? The war criminals were being held?

Southard: We go where?

Howe: You were staying out in town...

Southard: Mm hm.

Howe: Where was it that you went to work?

Southard: Well, let me see... I just took it for granted ... We...well, the stockade where we went, to guard, probably was the most important thing that we did. So, we checked in...When I first started, we worked four hours on, and eight hours off for twenty-four hours, and then you had three days off. And I talked to the Captain, said, "You know, why can't—" 'cause we had to keep the phone covered at all times—I says, "Why can't we work one day, and get six off?" And he said, "I don't care how you do it. Just don't let me go over there and call or something, and, find nobody on that phone." So, I changed it, and we worked one day and had six off. So, I got a lot of traveling in that...

Howe: Wow.

Southard: But you don't...in the military you don't usually find people like that. He don't—

Howe: Right.

Southard: They don't trust you. It's gotta be rigid; everything has to, or that's what I had with the—reason I didn't like the military... [Laughs].

Howe: Yeah. They do that for a reason.

Southard: I know they do.

Howe: But sometimes they do get carried away.

Southard: [Laughs].

Howe: So, talk about some of the other folks that you worked with. You found them six days off, so they must have liked you.

Southard: I traveled to Switzerland. I traveled down t...I can't think...we had a non-com house there. And we could go buy booze for that non-com house. So, I went away with guys that went down to Italy to buy bourbon and all

that stuff for the non-com house. So, I just had plenty of time to goof off, so to speak. [Laughs].

Howe: Okay. Anything from that experience that you recall as being significant? Some of the faces that you saw come through? The names, maybe?

Southard: I don't remember any. I had some people that we were pretty close to it because I took my wife back over to meet them. But the Austrians, I thought, were nice people. I never found one that liked Ger—that liked Hitler.

Howe: Hm.

Southard: But, you know, if you go back and look at history, there had to be a lot of Austrians that like Hitler because he was in control, and he was a big shot, and I never questioned about that...questioned them about that. But I felt that ...you know, it just like, when you're Army, you do what the Army says. Well, when Hitler was in, they did what he said. And we have a lot of friends over there. They were nice people.

Howe: Nice.

Southard: I...when I went to—originally went to Basic Training in Florida, people wouldn't even associate with you. But those people were glad to associate with you. They were—

Howe: Hm.

Southard: Just a different breed of people. Those mountain people are anyway. I think they are...you have to be...they have to be able to take care of themselves.

Howe: And...do you feel like there's a sense that they're more willing to take care of other people?

Southard: Yeah.

Howe: That's an interesting lesson to learn.

Southard: Yeah. I was amazed at the people down there, and how helpful they were. And they didn't have to be, but they were.

Howe: Hm.

Southard: They were just seemed normal to me.

Howe: So, what else do you recall from your time in service?

Southard: That's about all. I got out as soon as I could because I didn't like the idea of being told what I had to do. With no explanation. Now, if they'd sit down and talk to me, and tell me why, I'd have no problem. But they tell you to do this, and it's something that is as useless as could possibly be. There's no need for it; I have problems with that.

And...I refused to do that with my men. I would—I just wouldn't do it. If I couldn't tell 'em exactly why I wanted something done, then we just ignored it.

Howe: Seems to be a recurring theme. So, you got out in '46? And what did you do when you got out?

Southard: Well, I went back to work at Delco Remy, temporarily. Then, I went to college, and...I'm trying to think...I didn't stay in too long, or college too long, and I can't remember why. But...I can't tell ya.

Howe: That's okay.

Southard: My memory's not as good as it used to be.

Howe: That's quite alright. So you left college...what did you start to do in the civilian work force?

Southard: Well, I went to work for Delco Remy for a short time.

Howe: Okay.

Southard: And then, I started a sales job, and sold cooking equipment for a while, and then I went to work for Allis-Chalmers at that time, and they joined Siemens. So, I sold mechanical equipment for a long time.

Howe: How do you feel your experience in the military prepared you for that civilian career?

Southard: Well, I guess it taught me to...learn...how to get along with people and be demanding. In other words, there's nothing that bothered me more than somebody saying do something that's stupid that there's no reason to do. And I just absolutely refused to make my men do that.

Howe: Right.

Southard: But generally, the higher-ups, I had no trouble with them 'cause my men stayed out of trouble. They did their jobs, and we didn't have any trouble.

Howe: Respect. Have you associated with any veterans' organizations since?

Southard: Yeah, I be—we belong to the VA. But I've kept track of people that I was in the service with. And—but the VA is the only one we've been active with a long time.

Howe: Gotcha. Is there...is there anything that you thought I would ask about that we didn't touch on? Or is there anything that you would like to add?

Southard: I can't think of anything.

Howe: Okay, I'm very fortunate to have this opportunity. To come and spend time with veterans who have served before me, and I wanted to say on behalf of the Pritzker Military Museum & Library, and for my own part, want to thank you for your service, and thanks for your time today.

Southard: Okay.

[End of Interview]