

Kenneth "Rock" Merritt Oral History

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START [0:0:00]

Clarke: Welcome to this special episode of Pritzker Military Presents, featuring the oral history of Sergeant Major Kenneth 'Rock' Merritt. On behalf of the Pritzker Military Museum and Library, I'm Kenneth Clark and with me today in his house in Fayetteville, North Carolina is a veteran who embodied the spirit of the greatest generation. Like so many of his generation, the attack on Pearl Harbor convinced Sergeant Major Merritt to join the military. Now, Rock, thank you so much for having me at your house here today. It's a wonderful opportunity to sit down and get to know you a little bit, and, hopefully, what we discuss today will be shared with many across the nation as they download this podcast and as they watch this on their computers and things like that. I'd like to start off at the very beginning: where were you born and when?

Merritt: I was born in Warner, Oklahoma, Muskogee County, 10th of August 1923. And I'll be 94 years old coming up this August.

Clarke: Congratulations on that!

Merritt: Thank you.

Clarke: Now, is Oklahoma home to you, or is it a way station?

Merritt: It was, until after the war, and then when I went regular army, I stayed almost thirty six years in the regular army, and out of that thirty six years, I spent fourteen years overseas. And most of the other the time, 90% of the time, was spent here at Fort Bragg or in the state of North Carolina. So, when I got selected for five more years, I stayed more in North Carolina. So, I bought me a piece of land, built a home, and stayed here, in North Carolina because that's where all my friends are at and most all my relatives are here, in North Carolina.

Clarke: Was Oklahoma a long time family home? Generational? Or was it?

Merritt: My dad came there in 1903 and all the Merritt's did, father did...and yes. Most of them are in Oklahoma, It's our home

Clarke: What was growing up like, before the war in Oklahoma?

Merritt: It was rough. We were, I lived through the depression, lived through the big dust bowl, and I, at seventeen, joined a CCC camp. That's the Civilian Conservation Corps, which was established by President Roosevelt to help support a man's family. We got a total of thirty dollars a month, twenty-five dollars went home to the parents, and I got five dollars a month to buy toy articles and what have you.

So anyway, I spent two hitches in that. And we were building bridges over White river in Colorado, and what have you, and I worked my way up to a Mess Sergeant, I was an eighteen year-old Mess Sergeant in Grand Junction Colorado when they bombed Pearl Harbor. And, of course, that was December the 7th 1941, and January the 20th, 1942 they disbanded all the CCC camps and from there I got out, I helped build Camp Gruber, Oklahoma. I helped build Camp Hale, Colorado. And I built ships in Vallejo, in Loyola, California [0:3:10] and that's when I decided, they're gonna draft me and I'm gonna volunteer, so I come in and volunteered for the airborne.

Clarke: We don't have a lot of people that talk about the Civilian Conservation Corps, these days. How important was that to you and the people that you were with?

Merritt: Well, it was really important to my dad and my family, because labor, when I was in the CCC camp, for a grown man, it was a dollar a day. Now, the army didn't like us, sir, because we got thirty dollars a month and the army was getting twenty-one dollars a month, so that didn't go over too good with the army. But anyway, they took all these young kids, seventeen years old you had to be and what have, like I said, twenty-five dollars a month went to the family. Now they did have leaderships in there, but they only had two ranks. You were either a leader or an assistant leader. A leader drew forty five dollars a month. Assistant leader drew thirty-six. So, when I become a mess sergeant in a CCC camp, I was drawing forty five dollars a month. Well, twenty-five still went to my dad, but the rest went to me! That was the most money I ever made in my life, then--now I was getting twenty dollars a month from the CCC camp--and we had our officers, were army officers, and we didn't have no army NCOs [Non-Commissioned Officers], but we did have army officers. Now, some of them might have been retired and then come back, I don't know. Anyway, we lived in army barracks, we worked every day from eight o'clock in the morning to five in the afternoon. Doing an inspection on Saturday, just like the army. So when I come into the army after spending a year in a CC camp, I knew quite a bit about army life, how to make a bed, you know, we'd even done drills! Close order drill. I knew how to drill. I remember being in Fort Sill, Oklahoma, when I'd come in the army, and corporal he was God, corporals and buck sergeants were in charge, they were gods in the army. And they were giving instructions on how to make a bed, and when he got through he looked over at me and said, "You." and I said, "Me?" "You haven't noticed a thing I said," then he said, "Get up here and make a bed." I said, "What kind you want? Hospital fold, or what have you?" So, he called me smartass or something, you know. So I made the bed. And he said, "You got some army experience?" "No, Sir. I never spent a day in the army." "Well, where you learn that?" "I followed your instructions, Sir!" So I picked up all that in the CC camp, and I knew close order drill. So anyway, the CC camp, it helped my dad great for that year he was in, and like I said that was in 1940 and 1941, because it ended when they bombed Pearl Harbor. CC camps ended in that year, or what have you. But they done good. Santee Cooper right here in North Carolina, it was built by the PWA and the CC camps and stuff like that you know. We had the CC camps for young kids, and they had the PWA, Public Works Administration for grown folks like my dad, and you know, so anyway, it done great for the year I was in, and what have you.

Clarke: Thank you for that. You mentioned you decided to enlist before the drafted you.

Merritt: Yes, after I done all the building of the army bases and some ships, I knew they was gonna draft me, so now, I'm nineteen years old. So I'm gonna go join the Marines, you know, I went to Muskogee, Oklahoma and I passed by this sign that had a paratrooper on it, and a Thompson submachine gun lying across his lap as his reserve, and the caption below it said, "Are you man enough to fill these boots?" and then it said, "In addition, you get fifty dollars a month for jump pay." I said, "I'm gonna go in here and talk to this guy." So I went in and I never did get to the Marine's station

Clarke: So, where did you see the poster?

Merritt: The day I reenlisted.

Clarke: But where was it?

Merritt: Oh, in the recruiting station of the army. And the building in Muskogee, Oklahoma, where all the recruiting centers were, it had army, navy, it had all three of them right in a row right in this building. And the first one was the army and that's where I'd seen it, and I think the Marine was in the middle. I never did get to the Marines. I got in there, he signed me up, put me in a hotel that night, next day took me to Tulsa, Oklahoma, from Tulsa went to Fort Shill Oklahoma, swore in, and they say, "You're going to Camp Blanding, Florida, 'cuz they're forming the 508th Parachute Infantry down there". So I went down to Camp Blanding, Florida and I was one of the first people when they herded us up to this building on the 20th of October, I got down there in October the 19th, and on the 20th, I guess the 508 was about half organized, and some major come out and read the Department of the Army orders, so and so, effective this day, the 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment is so organized. Then he left and the colonel came out, Roy E. Lindquist come out and talked and what have you, and told us all what we we're gonna do. And from there, thirteen weeks later we finished basic training and went to jump school in Fort Benning, Georgia.

Clarke: You mentioned before that you were building bases, you'd been building ships, you were seeing what was going on. What else made you aware of what was going on in the world, made you know that you would get drafted?

Merritt: Well, of course, we didn't have TV or nothing like that. We did have radios, and I knew very little about what was going on until they bombed Pearl Harbor. When they bombed Pearl Harbor, you had to see this, on the 8th of December 1941. And where I reenlisted in Muskogee, Oklahoma, around the whole building was people trying to enlist. People 65 years old trying to get into the army what have you, and everybody was just, I mean you had to see it to believe it. If you wanted to volunteer, it took me three days to get sworn in by the time I got, because people just volunteered to do something after bombing Pearl Harbor. Of course, we declared war on Japan, but of course, December the 8th we declared war on Germany the next day, the 9th of December, or what have you. And everybody wanted to be in on it. If you were a 4F, that was a disgrace, I mean, people, they tried to get in, they were turned down because of some disability they had, and, sure, they would wind up driving a school bus or something like that, but they felt bad about it, really. I guess that's why they call it the greatest generation, because everybody, well...overnight, sir, we built an army of what? 16.2 million men and women, overnight, almost the greatest army the world had ever know, and what have you. So like I say,

out of those 16.2 million, 15.2 million has already died, so we've got less than a million of WWII veterans still around. And like they say, according to the papers I read, they are passing away or dying at the rate of five hundred a day, so they won't be around long. And following them, right about three or four years later, is the veterans from Korea, a lot of them are coming in too, or what have you.

Clarke: Well let me ask you a question about, it's kind of a more human question, not necessarily a military one, but, I've heard many people talk, and I think this is true for me and everybody, but the things you're talking about, how distant do they feel to you, in your memory?

Merritt: Well, they feel like it was done last month, period. All that stuff. I been retired, sir, for forty years, seems like I retired a couple of weeks ago. Course I still go to Fort Bragg, I do a lot of speaking at the Fort Bragg base, basically I speak on leadership traits and principles with the squad leader, because I promised General Bradley, General Bradley promised me when I was on active duty, "Sergeant Major, when you retire, these squad leaders need some help. The Sergeant majors and the senior NCO's they need help. Period. Why? 'cuz, they've got the toughest job in the Army." So I did. When I, when they organized the 508th in 2006, they made me honorary command sergeant major of the 508th. And from that day on, which would have been ten years, I've been making speeches all over South Carolina, North Carolina, Georgia, and especially at Fort Bragg. Mostly with the 82nd Airborne Division. But, evidently, some of them liked it. I'm now in Special Forces, other units, I'm speaking, too, but I'm getting to the point where it'll have to come to a halt. Even with my glasses on I'm having trouble seeing my nose. If I don't know it by memory then I have a little difficulty. But anyway, as long as I can do it I'll keep on doing it.

Clarke: That's great, and I'm glad you will. I think that's a funny thing about memory, because the things that happened, you know, like you know right here sitting with me in this room, that crowd around the recruiting center is to you is like yesterday

Merritt: Yeah.

Clarke: A lot of other things that happened to you are like yesterday. And we'll get into that. Is there anybody else in your family that served? Is there any, were you the first, were there cousins, were there uncles?

Merritt: I had two brothers, both of them in the navy, one of them was on a submarine, that's my youngest brother, and the other was on an aircraft carrier in the navy during WWII. I got two sons, Kenny and Jerry, Kenny did not, he wanted to go into the army, they turned him down because he'd had a collapsed lung. Jerry, my youngest, he went into the air force and retired, he was an O6', he lives up here in Stanford North Carolina, retired, about 1st of January he was CEO of some big company, because he was a medical officer, and now he plays golf about four days a week and that's about it and what have you. And most all of my uncles were in the service, you know, and what have you. So yeah, I had a lot of my relatives in the war, during WWII and Korea. And I have had distant cousins in Vietnam that've been called up and also served a long time over there

Clarke: Let's go back to you, you've just sworn into the army,

Merritt: Yep.

Clarke: if you can, kinda, share with me your thoughts about your training, because you had a leg up on everybody: you'd done the CCC, you knew how to make beds, you knew how to march, you knew how to do some stuff, right? But what is your recollection looking back at, say the moment you swore to kind of the minute doing your first combat jump. Is that sort of a, were you transformed, or was it sort of a slow process to get fit to fight?

Merritt: No I, I have to say that at Camp Blanding, Florida, they treated us like dogs. And I mean rough. sir, in the thirteen weeks I was there, when you stepped out, if you wanted to go to the PX [Post Exchange], you had to run, or have a slip in your pocket from a doctor that you weren't able to run. We had to march five miles in an hour, fifty some odd minutes, full-field kit, they had us so psyched up training when we got ready for Normandy, even down to a lower squad leader- I was a squad leader when I jumped into Normandy- they had us so psyched up, if my squad failed their mission, the whole operation overlord would fall apart. That's how they had us, the whole division! Trained that way, everyone had to do it that way. If just one thing went wrong, it was going to fall apart. But anyway, I have to say after the basic training and after jump school, then all the stuff changed. All the NCOs, all the officers would have a beer with NCOs, the NCOs would have a beer with a private, they all got together, they all bonded together and what have you. And that bond has lasted even until today. The 2nd Battalion and the 1st of 508th, they still have the same bond that the 508 had when we jumped into Normandy. And I think it was all through the training they had. And when I retired, the 508 Association in Camp Blanding, Florida, October the 20th 2004, that was 2004, that was some fifty or sixty ... I had at that time, seven-hundred and twenty people was at the retirement. One-hundred and fifty of them jumped into Normandy with us. That was in 2004, and now, last year at South Carolina I had four that had jumped into Normandy with us. But anyway, we went into Normandy, I'm gonna tell you, there was some mean paratroopers. They were taught to kill, and that's what they did. Period. You know. And like I say, I've never seen no coward, nobody refuse anything in combat in my 508, in my regiment, period. I've seen one man, we may get to this later on, where we were pinned down for four days, we were two and a half miles east of Hill 30, and we had captured a German soldier, he was on the lookout or listening post, and he belonged to this division- German division- that had us pinned down, so we knew who was out in front of us. Because we had one of their troopers, and on the 3rd day-we'd only jumped into Normandy with one day of meals, so three meals- this one guy went over the hedge-row to surrender, tied white handkerchief on his bayonet and went over, and a trooper tackled him and brought him back. I'll never forget it, he said "You go over that hedge-row one more time and I'm gonna kill you." So can you imagine what would happen if that guy had got to that German battalion commander and said, "There's only thirty-five people over there." We wouldn't be here. That's the only person that I'd seen in my whole year in combat that wanted to surrender or something like that, or what have you. But anyway, yes. I remember, well, right across the street here is Command Sergeant Major Louis J. Gutierrez and he drives me at night to all my speeches and stuff, because I don't drive too much at night. And he says, "Rock, how do you remember them things?" and I said, "In everybody's mind, there are a few things that they will never forget. And some of mine are in Normandy." Normandy...sir, I'll tell you, the first day the 508 jumped into Normandy, they lost the entire chain of

command. Not captured, not wounded, all of them killed: Colonel Bachelor, battalion commander, Captain Ruddy, the company commander, Lieutenant Snee, platoon leader, First Sergeant "Snuffy" Smith, the first sergeant and Alvin C. Carter, my sergeant. All of them killed on the first day, no replacements coming in, everybody had to move up one. So I went in as a corporal on D-Day. Before the sun set on D-day, I'm a buck sergeant because my sergeant got killed. I go from one machine gun squad to four machine gun squads. And we were trained for that. They knew...They predicted, what, 70% casualties into Normandy? I guess my battalion....My regiment probably had that many. Anyway we were trained at not only one, but to jump two grades if you had to! So I went from one machine gun to four machine guns and four squads. From a squad leader to what's called a section leader, and what have you. The battalion executive officer major, he went up to colonel. The company exec-first leader, he went up to captain. All of us went up in one day. That was just the first day, you know, not counting the next thirty-two days which added to the casualties we lost. I remember when we come out of Normandy, in Wallington Park, right outside of Nottingham, England, we assembled the regiment, and we had went into Normandy with 2,051 officers and men. We had 880 some-odd men at that formation. After we come out of Normandy. So we'd lost a lot of them. Now that included the killed, the wounded, and the prisoners of war. All three of those.

Clarke: Tell me a little bit about where you, when you were training, when you went overseas, you finished your training in the States and you went overseas, and they you had to do more training when you were in Ireland. Right?

Merritt: Yes

Clarke: So is that what you were training? Learning to go up a couple of ranks? What were they doing with you in Ireland before you jumped?

Merritt: Ireland was, I don't know, it was terrible in Ireland. The weather was just so bad over there. Here what they started: They started with the squad training that was the first thing we done, a squad. Then you moved up to company level, company level training. Then you moved up to battalion level, done the battalion level operation. And then you went and jumped up to regiment level. That's what we done in the three or four months we were there. And over and over and over. So anyway, I guess they knew then, we were training, I guess to jump into Normandy. I don't know because we were, I remember the Merderet River that was in the briefing and all that stuff and what have you. So anyway, when we got finished with all that training, and it was good training, in other words, they would, at that time, this is before Normandy, I'm a squad leader, so I've got six men, right? They give me a route, a mission, it might be we had to march out fifteen or twenty miles, and there we'd pick up instructions, what we were supposed to do. They'd give us one meal, and we'd have to eat off the land, off the farmers and stuff like that, and that would be a three day operation where the squad leaders would come out, you know? And we would go out and take the one day's ration they gave us for the three days, and we would get stuff from farmers, eggs and stuff like that, live off the land, and come back. And then the next thing was to jump up to the platoon level, it was the same thing but a little bit farther and a little bit better. Then see, we would in one place we had to take a chateau, I guess that was what the company was going to do when it jumped into Normandy, was to take this building for some reason or

other, so we were trained for all that. Course, when they lost us in the jump, and all this stuff went besides the road, we didn't know where we were at or what we were doing or what have you, but, I was with, thirty-seven people for five days and nights, with Captain Adams and what have you, but I think the largest group we had out of the two-thousand and some-odd men was, somebody I think it was Colonel probably Lindquist had two hundred or something like that, out of two-thousand.

Clarke: So you, you're loading up onto the plane, and it's probably another memory that sticks with you like it was yesterday, standing on that plane, getting ready to go jump into Normandy,

Merritt: Yeah.

Clarke: Tell me a little bit about what you and the men were going through, you know, at that moment. Then also as a follow up, where were you as far as you know, as far as the famous landmarks, that people know now in hindsight?

Merritt: Ok. Well we, first thing I remember before we boarded the plane, we had a sand-box briefing of where we were going and what our mission was. Then when they released us to go blacken our faces, we had none of this here camouflage stuff. We had these stoves that we cooked with; we took the black stuff off the stove and blacked our face. Everybody had it black. We all marched to the plane. We'd already put our heavy equipment bundles in the plane, we marched to the plane, shook hands with the pilot, because the plane only carried seventeen people. As a matter of fact, it took one-hundred and twenty C-47s to drop the 508. Today thirteen C-17s could drop the whole damn thing. But anyway, we had to go to two or three other planes, everybody shaking hands, everybody got in their planes, the equipment bundles we had-we had a heavy drop, they called it, with six equipment bundles, four under the belly of the planes, four or six, I forget which one, and two door bundles. Platoon leader was Lieutenant Napierkowski, he was number one, the jump master, and I'm number two man. I've got my machine gun there, rolled up with ammo, eight boxes of ammo rolled up with a machine gun a tripod and all that stuff with it. Some blood plasma in it. A folding bicycle. Keep in mind there was no vehicles going in, in my battalion we had three battalion commanders, regimental commanders, and regimental check, each one of them, I guess, was going to fight the god damn war on a damn bicycle, I dunno. But my platoon leader, he didn't care too much for me for some reason or other. He gave me the job of our battalion commander's bicycle. You had to put it in the equipment bundle and roll it up, put a parachute on it and what have you, and put it in the door bundle. We were flying over the English Channel, and we started just when we left the coast taking ack-ack [sound of guns shooting at aircrafts. Lieutenant Napierkowski kicked the bicycle out into the English Channel. I said, "Lieutenant, why'd you kick that out?" I'll never forget what he said. He said, "Corporal, that thing was shot out and don't you ever forget it." I said, "Yes, Sir." I didn't want in the first place to jump into combat looking around to find a stupid bicycle to give it to my Colonel! So I got rid of that. So anyway, we flew over the Merderet River, I could see the water and I could see all the flares coming up from the coast line and what have you, seemed to me like we flew maybe, I dunno, eight to ten minutes after we hit the coast line before we jumped. And we had the cricket, the 508 did, the 82nd did not have it. I don't care what they tell you. General Gavin would not let the 82nd because, in Sicily somewhere, they had them, and they were shooting each other, and Gavin said, they're not gonna have that no more. But the 508, we had the

cricket. We didn't have the quick release shoot, we had the old Hornet type. The British had the quick release, that was their invention, we didn't have it. So, kick the equipment bundle out, it had a light on it. We turned the light on, it was red. But when it went out and it opened up, there was red tracers everywhere, so you didn't know which one was the equipment bundle. We were not briefed on the hedges, the famous hedges in France, which was three feet wide on a mound. Three feet wide and about 3.4 feet high. And the hedge itself was about six, so you're talking nine or ten feet high on a hedge. I landed in this ten acres of real estate I guess, and while I'm trying to get out of my parachute, I see this C-47 coming and it was on fire. And I was in this briar patch, and this damn German was shooting at me with a machine gun, and here come this C-47 and it looked like it was going to come down and land right on top of me! And I said, "Oh my God!" and I'm still trying to get out of this parachute with one-hundred pound of equipment, with landmines, all that shit we had on. But it come, fifty feet over my head, but a C-47 coming fifty feet over your head? I could see all the backpacks of the parachutes flapping out of the fuselage, the troops had gotten out. When it crashed, half a mile up the road, when it did, it lit up the air just like, just like it is out here today! I think, you won't believe it, in this ten acres of land where I landed, one equipment bundle landed in the middle of this land: my machine gun. I opened it up, got the machine gun out, got the ammo, the tripod and everything. And I'm walking up to this hedge row, and I'm going to go down to that burning plane. Because I knew that I was the second man out, my troops had to be out in front, you know. I heard something, on the other side, and I snapped this little cricket, nothing come back. I waited and snapped it again. And then, it came back, two clicks. I don't know why, but I didn't, I knew the password. I just said, "Who's there? Instead of, "Give me the password." And a guy said, in a weak voice, "I am an American Chaplain" and I said, "Thank God." So I said, "Sir, can you get over this hedge row? 'cuz I'm pretty heavy loaded over here." He said "I think so", he got over there and he said, I told him I was Corporal Merritt, and he told me who he was, and said, "What are we gonna do?" And I said, "My troops are up there, so we're gonna follow this hedge row to where that burning plane is, but first, sir, can you help me with, carry this ammo?" That's when he said, "Praise the Lord and pass me the ammunition!" and I did, and what have you. There was a song out, "Praise the lord and Pass the Ammunition", and all the ammo people knew all about it, and what have you. So anyway, I had this ammo boxes, six of them in a daisy chain, where you just throw it over your shoulder, three in the back and three in the front, so he carried them. He was with me, sir, all the way through, until the 90th and the Texas Division relieved us, on D plus 4, I think. But he, I needed him to help fire on an attack on a machine gun, but he wouldn't fire. He'd carry the ammo and he'd be an ammo bearer, but I guess him being a chaplain, maybe, he didn't want to kill somebody but what have you. But that chaplain, I always talk about him in my speeches because he was the morale builder of the thirty-seven people that was pinned down, you know, I said thirty-five a while ago, but we had two that was wounded. But nobody was evacuated. We were two and a half miles east of Hill 30. We didn't know that, but that's where we was at. Anyway, when we got there and this battalion stopped us and started killing us and wounding us, and the chaplain, he went around, he took care of the wounded first, then he done whatever he would do for the people that was killed, said prayers for them, he was the last man to dig a foxhole and what have you, this young [unintelligible] Then he'd come back. And I had this German prisoner, and I'd have him dig a foxhole for the chaplain, what have you, see. And that chaplain stayed with me all the time there, and he kept the morale going, telling them, you know, the land troops are coming, they're coming, they're coming, they're coming,

what have you, and so, anyway. When we got up to assemble on Hill 30, that's where the regiment and everything was assembled on D plus 4, I think, and the chaplain he shook my hand, he was either with the 101st or the 82nd or the 507 or the 2, and I've never seen him again after that, or what have you. And the prisoner I had, I turned him over to S2 of the 508, and I turned around and I walked thirty paces back across the hard top across the Thomson submachine gun line and this sergeant killed him. And I went back there to get a hold of the sergeant and I said, "What happened?" and he was crying and he said they had killed his chaplain, hung him up by the heels and cut his throat. That was a mistake, there was only one chaplain killed in the Normandy invasion, and that was the regimental chaplain of the 508, and he was with a German Major in Chef-du-Pont¹. And they had all these people wounded in the streets and they were finding a place to set up a temporary hospital, our chaplain and this major, and a German sniper shot our chaplain in the head, killed him. That was the only chaplain killed. But the rumor got out that they were killing our chaplains and what have you. Now rumors in combat is really terrible. In the first place, once they get started, it's a long time and a lot of effort to get them stopped. Cause see, we first jumped into Normandy we was told not to take no prisoners. That was bad. We were told 'cuz we had no place to take care of them. But then they changed that in the middle of the thing, you could take prisoners and what have you. So anyway, this chaplain whose name is, I forget, he was a Polish chaplain, he loaned me fifty dollars to get married, yeah, at Camp MacKall, North Carolina. But anyway, we got up on Hill 30 and I had the A4 machine guns. They issued me, now I'm a buck sergeant, they issued me eight 1917 A1 water-cooled machine guns that we'd never seen in our life. That was the number one machine gun in WWI, a water cooled. Well, it was better than the A4, it was more effective, fired faster, fired further, and what have you, but it was awful heavy and cumbersome to operate. I'd never seen one in my life. Now I said eight. There are two buck sergeants, section sergeants, me and another guy, so we each got four apiece. And I'm looking at him, and he's got a gallon of water can, a kilometer on it, everything in there. Water cooled, it held nine pints of water. And I'm looking at it, and we're gonna attack the next day. And a lieutenant came by, never heard of him, and he say he's from the 3rd Battalion 508, and "Ah!" he said. "The 1917 A1, I was a corporate gunner in..." and I said, "Sir, Jesus Christ, you godsend, I need some help here!" I told him, and he said, "Don't worry about it," cause you had to pack them with stuff to keep the water from going and all that stuff, you know, and they had all that stuff but we didn't know what it was for! So he taught us how to pack the machine gun, put the water in them, and all those things for the next day of the attack. The lieutenant did. And I come to find out who he was, and, this lieutenant, bless his heart, he got killed later on, but anyway, from then on...

Clarke: If you don't mind, let me ask you a question, you've landed, you've hooked up with the Chaplain, you're moving forward towards Hill 30, did you have any way of figuring out where you were at that point? Was there any way you knew until you got to Hill 30?

Merritt: Well I didn't. And I didn't tell you, what I picked up from when me and the Chaplain, we started off, two people, towards the burning plane. Time I got to the burning plane, we had picked up thirty-five people, to include two first lieutenants and a captain. Now the Captain Adams, he's company commander of A Company, he was a company commander that my section was attached to into Normandy. I was supposed to get up with him. So anyway, yeah, we got pinned down, I don't know, a

¹ The Chaplain is, likely to be, Father Maternowski, killed near Guetteville.

mile maybe from the burning plane, after we got by it. We got pinned down and a lieutenant by the name, a first Lieutenant named Abbott. I'll never forget his name, we were pinned down and there were machine guns firing at us, and he said "Corporal," and he pointed to me, "Corporal," and I said, "Me?", "Yep. Take a couple of men and go and knock out that machine gun." And it was the calm way that he said it, like "Take a couple men and go and fill up the canteens"! We're all pinned down, thirty-seven of us by this damn machine gun firing at us, and he wants me to go up and knock it out! Me? Yep. I didn't know who in the hell he was. He didn't know me. I think he was -- because he got killed the next day. Anyway, it scared the hell out of me. But we'd been taught how to knock out a machine gun. And after thinking for what seemed like forever, it was probably a few seconds, it dawned on me what I had to do. Before we jumped into Normandy, we had a class on this goddamn machine, this here, Gammon Grenade G-a-m-m-o-n grenade, British concept. It was about the size of a softball, looked like it was in a black sock, had a cap on it, with the tape forward. Undo the tape, take the cap off, and if you was a tank I could throw it at you right there and all the force would go forward. Nothing would come back. And they had this here steel, big plate, at the demonstration they was giving us in England, throw that Gammon Grenade, it melted right through that steel. So I said, well, and they recommended that for knocking out a machine gun. So I went, I didn't know, I had one man in that thirty-seven out of my squad, named James, Wilbur James got killed in the Battle of the Bulge. He'd come out of the reform school out in Oklahoma. And he was a good soldier. He was one of those guys where the judge said, "You can do some time or you can join the army, one of them of things." Anyway, I was always taught, "Don't think that you're the god, you're the only one that knows anything about the squad and you're gonna do everything." So I said, "We've got knock out that machine, and what do you think?" I've had a plan, but I want them to tell me what, you know. And James he says, "Well why don't we, one of us take three Gammon grenades, leave our rifles here, the other two we can take them on rifles, lay down a base of fire, so maybe we can get there close to them." Yep, that's good, that's what I had in mind. He said, "Let me have the Gammon grenades." He was a small man, and the other guy I picked, I knew, he wasn't in my squad, but he was a supply sergeant, reduced to private for having gonorrhoea. They bust you, if you have a venereal disease, you got busted. So anyway that was our three that went up there and knocked that machine gun and came back. Abbot said, "Thank you very much, good job." He didn't put none of us in for it, because he got killed the next day. But uh, we had, he got killed on the way to where this German tank pinned us down, and he didn't get there. He got killed before then. But anyway, that was my trip, to answer your question, from the time I picked the chaplain up to knock out that machine gun, then we ran into this German listening post, I'll call it. Sixteen years old, never forgot. I see his picture all the time in my mind, had a long overcoat on, hung almost to his ankles, and he was sixteen years old and spoke English, you know, and what have you. And he would tap me on the shoulder and say, "Two o'clock," and say "Boschi is coming." They counter attacked on us. We had machine guns, we had mortars, A1 mortars and what have you, they didn't know how big a group we had. So anyway, that's what happened before we got to where we was pinned down. On the way from where I landed, I would probably say we marched, must have been two hours altogether.

Clarke: Probably safe to say you've never, except for maybe what you experienced during Market Garden and the Bulge, is there anything like that?

Merritt: Market Garden compared to Normandy was a real crime, as far as I was concerned. Period. Course you know, Market Garden was you know, was run by the British. Under the British command. And so after the first four days in Normandy...taking the bridge in there, course, the 504 took the bridge, but we were on the bridge the night of the 18th. We went into the city of Nijmegen on the night of the 17th, when we jumped. We got run out of there - we didn't get run out of there. We were on the end of the bridge when the Germans was attacking our drop zone, and the 325 was coming in and going after them and everything, coming in, they called us out at 2 o'clock in the morning, "Move out of Nijmegen and come back to the drop zone and defend the drop zone." We had to do that. So we did, we pulled out, and we had a hell of a fight on the drop zone. And, that's the day I've seen the big P-51 fighting the Germans over-I think it was the 18th or 19th of September, and we, I'd like to say we trekked in again, and the 325 had a lot of people come in and what have you. And 504 took the bridge, and then we moved all the way across the Waal River, I think it's called the Waal River, all the way across over to the British section and relieved them. Some outfit over there, and we sat there, for I don't know on defense for a couple of weeks, something like that. And we lost all of our people, far as I'm concerned, the first week into Holland, you know. Now, Cornelius Ryan wrote the book *A Bridge too Far* and he came to the primary showing of *A Bridge too Far* was shown at Fayetteville, North Carolina. Course Cornelius Ryan came to Fayetteville to brief the corps commander, Lieutenant General Richard Sikes. And he was dying with cancer then, but we didn't know it, Cornelius Ryan was, and General Sikes told him, "I didn't make Operation Market Garden, but my Sergeant Major did, do you mind if he sits in on this briefing?" Said, "No, bring him in, Sir". So I went in. The movie was gonna be that night in Fayetteville. There were thirteen of us in Fayetteville that night that jumped into Normandy. We were guests of the mayor of Fayetteville. So of course, Cornelius Ryan was telling General Sikes all about him writing the book, five years, he said it took him to write that book *A Bridge too Far*. He had interviewed everybody from a German Private to a Polish General. And all the Americans and everything. When he got through, General Sikes said, "Mr. Ryan, in your five years of research, give me three things that went wrong at Operation Market Garden. Because, Market Garden they say was a failure, you know, if you read the history, it was a failure, you know?" so he said, "Well, number one, the date was just one day off." At Arnhem, the 15th German Army, Hitler had recalled senior von Rundstedt which he relieved after the Normandy invasion. He relieved him because he didn't stop the people from coming. He called him back to duty to review the 15th German, and they were in Arnhem. On the 17th, down at someplace in Germany, some town...anyway, the first army was about to overtake this town and Hitler asked von Rundstedt to send some troops down there, to help out the Germans. They were on the road when the British 1st Airborne Division jumped, they jumped right on top of the 15th German Army. But he said, "In all the flying over Arnhem, they had never picked up the 15th German Army in Arnhem." And he said "I don't understand how you can hide an army." Now an army is not a division or nothing, Jesus Christ, it might have ten divisions in it! That's first mistake. They should've known that the 15th German Army was there. He said, "Number two, they had the wrong airborne commander." Only one man had the experience in that, and that was... I think his name...he was the 18th Airborne Corps commander anyway. He should have... he was in a B17, three thousand feet above Arnhem when the jump went on. And he said, "Number three, that captain that briefed, every time he would brief, Montgomery would always say to the captain, "What about the Arnhem bridge?" The captain would say, "Sir, that bridge is too far." He said, "You know what, that bridge was too far. They should have stopped at Nijmegen." That

was the three that he said, you know, that went wrong. So anyway, that night they showed the movie downtown in Fayetteville, and then thirteen of us after that they had us up on the stage and they asked us questions about it and what have you, but you know, the 82nd and the 101st, they took every mission - if you read the book -- they took every mission they was given. And in Operation Market Garden, they didn't fail. I asked every time, and no one would give me the answer: the man in charge of the British in Arnhem was a major, my question was: Where was your generals and colonels? Why was a major commanding a goddamn airborne division in that thing? Nobody ever answers. You know? But anyway, the Major done pretty good. The Queen promoted him all the way up to a two-star general. You know, when he got home. Well, we found out the corps commander, he was in a basement somewhere in some farmer's house with his radio, and he had the wrong crystals in! He couldn't communicate with nobody, period. I don't know where the division commander was, of the Airborne Division, I don't know where he was. I'm talking about the corps commander. He couldn't communicate with nobody. So the British had it all screwed up to start with, you know, what have you. Anyway, I always tell them, the 82nd and the 101st, there should be a footnote somewhere in the history that they took every mission they set out to accomplish. The only people that failed, and it wasn't their fault, I don't know what would have happened if the whole Airborne Division had gotten to Arnhem and had the generals and everything there instead of this Major. And the Major he got wounded...I forget, I think it was something like 6000 men out of 10,000 there. And like I say, every time they mention about Operation Market Garden, and the 82nd and 101st being part of the losing end of it, it's not fair to them for real.

Clarke: You mentioned to me earlier about your...

Merritt: Mathew B. Ridgeway, was the name of that guy

Clarke: That's who it is?

Merritt: Yeah, he said, course he said, "That's who should've been the Airborne commander." But, this was strictly Montgomery's operation, you know.

Clarke: So, you also were at the Battle of the Bulge?

Merritt: Yes. We had just come out of Operation Market Garden. I got to go to, 50% of the regiment was going to go to Paris for three days. I was in the first group, I got to go. Second group didn't get to go. I was at the NCO club at Soissons, France and I was shooting dice, I'll never forget it. I was fifteen hundred dollars ahead in a craps game, fifteen hundred dollars! And they came over and they said, "Attention, all Airborne personnel, report back to your unit immediately." They blinked the lights three or four times and said, "We're closing down." I got this musette bag full of francs, didn't know, and we were going to move out at say, 8 o'clock tomorrow morning, we were gonna move. We had turned all of our weapons for repairs and you know, we ain't got no weapons. They issued us at 2 o'clock in the morning water cooled machine guns, now we're familiar with water cooled now because we had them all through the war after Normandy, so we stayed up all night, nobody got no sleep. We worked on everything. At 8 o'clock we boarded cattle trucks. And sleeping and snoring, and we're headed down through Belgium and what have you, had no idea where we were going. Got to some town at about dark, and put me out with the A company overlooking this town, with my machine guns and what have you. And so the next

day I guess, we move into Vielsalm, Belgium. As we march into it, I look on the left hand side and I see this big house with a big yard in front of it, soldiers, lined up, about six inches of snow, all their boots sticking up. All lined up. Perfect. Thousands of them. Found out later, there was 106th Division that got chopped up at Vielsalm and what have you, they got relieved by the division. They'd run out of ammunition and everything. All them people lined up...terrible...We moved into Vielsalm and fought it and took Vielsalm and I guess that was probably the 20th or the 21st, something like that, we was only there four days, when we got word that we was gonna withdraw. And then they said, well, 82nd had never withdrawn in their lives, you know, and they knew that was gonna be bad morale. So they said, "The only reason you're doing it is not because of the enemy, it's because we straightened out the line." We knew that was a lie, because we could see in the river there, and the bridge, the bridge that this platoon leader from A Company blew and got the DSC [Distinguished Service Cross] for, when the German's Mark VI tank just started on it and the bridge blew up, here's a tank just sitting there, he can't move anywhere, and they say, "We're moving back to straighten out the line". The troops knew better than that shit. Well anyway, the command was that we move out at 8 o'clock that night, about ten or twelve miles back to the rear. Napierkowski, my platoon leader that kicked the bicycle out into the English Channel, he said "I'm going back with a Colonel we're going to reconnoiter the area. Go down and tell Lieutenant Epps, 2nd Lieutenant that he's in charge. Okay. I'm on my way down there, snow now is about a foot deep, and here comes this one plane over. American plane, P-51 or something. Drops a five-hundred pound bomb right on top of Lieutenant Epps. Here's this guy from Arkansas named Turley, running as hard as he could in the snow, right past me, I hollered, "Turley, where are you going?" He said "I ain't got time, a five-hundred pound bomb fell down there and buried Lt Epps alive and I've got to go see Lt. Napierkowski". Well, "Napierkowski's not there, you've got to see me." So I went down there, he wasn't lying. Epps was in this foxhole, just his boots was showing. We pulled him out, I called George Stoeckert, In fact, I'm going to his funeral in April this year. He's being buried up in Arlington National Cemetery. We went and had a jeep with a letter on it, put the x on it, and I took the briefcase off of him, had shrapnel all in it, and it had the platoon mail in it and maps in it and what have you. I took it off of him, you know, so we thought he was dead. We figured he was dead! You know, so we went back, we withdrew that night, we left a recovery platoon, a recovering company I guess, and the battalion exec, Major Delimeter, he was in charge of it, we left a platoon from each company that made up the delaying force. They didn't get back until the next morning in the daylight, because they had to have a bugout taken. I think, they got overrun and every man was on himself, they issued a bugout order, and they knows where to go. So they came back, staggered in next morning, all morning. So I told Lt. Napierkowski, when I get back, "Epps is dead and a couple more of my troops got killed." So anyway, that was the Battle of the Bulge, and we stayed there in defense until, I think it was January the 7th, and then Gavin came by.

Clarke: What was your primary purpose with being in defense?

Merritt: For being in defense? Well, we were holding the line. We were attached to another unit, they did straighten the line out, and all we had to do was defend them and not let them come into this town where the battalion was at. Period. We talked to them, the Germans talked to us at 2 o'clock in the morning! "Hey, how you doing over there?" "We're doing fine, how're you doing?" "Why don't you

come over here, and this and that?" "No, we ain't coming over there!" At 2 o'clock in the morning, they'd be coming out to the listening post and what have you. But anyway, Gavin came by and said, "We're gonna attack tomorrow morning, back to Vielsalm, we're going to re-take Vielsalm" and uh, I've said this before and I'll say it again: "I'd never seen my regimental sergeant major in combat, I never seen Roy E. Lindquist in combat." I've seen General Gavin many times, Normandy, everywhere. I've seen Gavin. He's always around. Carrying that M1 rifle down here like this, not over his shoulder, but by his side, and so anyway...we attacked the next morning. All day long it took us to attack Vielsalm. We didn't go into town of Vielsalm, we went into the high ground overlooking Vielsalm. Period. Here's where I lost Napierkowski. When we got onto the hill, after fighting all day long, all the trees were iced over, and the Germans were firing tree bursts. And when they hit them trees, ice would fall, I mean for a long time! This ice fell on Lt. Napierkowski and he fainted, he fell down. I picked him up and lifted him up, and he hadn't been scratched nowhere. He'd just fainted. I had my platoon runner named Purdy from Tulsa, Oklahoma, I told Purdy, "Take this lieutenant back to where we started from." That day, he took him back. They medi-evaced him back to Soissons, which is where we'd come from, I heard and a colonel told me this, he said because about ten days Napierkowski had come back and brought a bottle of scotch to the colonel and said "I'm back, where's my platoon?" Now I'm a platoon sergeant, I've got no officer. Lt. Epps, we thought was dead, Napierkowski was gone, and Colonel Warren said, "Well, I understand you're doing a good job guarding those prisoners back in Soissons, so I'm gonna let you go back there." He said, "Sergeant Rock Merrit, he's is doing job with the platoon, so you can just go back". He wouldn't let him, he sent him back! I don't know why that happened, but that's the last time I heard of Lt. Napierkowski. But then about ten days later, they pulled us into a rest area to take a shower and change clothes, an order came down that one man in every company in the 82nd Airborne Division of the 508 was authorized to go home for ten days. And this criteria is as follows: the man has got the most decorations and the man has been on the front line the longest of every company, that person can go on ten days leave. Well, there were two of us that had the same decorations: I had the Silver Star and he had the Silver Star, both of us had the same time in combat. George Stoeckert. Like I say, he just died here, and they're holding him until the 12th of April to bury him in Arlington National Cemetery, he called us up. And so he said, "The only thing I know how to do is just flip a coin," so we agreed. So I never forget: it was a thro-pence [three pence] from England, one of 'em had the queen and king on it. So I called heads, or he called tails...well anyway, I won. So that night they shipped me out of the 82nd, I go back, that was the end of my war, the end of WWII with me! In fact, I came back, I was at Le Havre France on the 9th of May, 1945 when I heard the whistles blowing and everything and the war ended. I got off on a plane there. And then I go through all these replacement centers, they were all named after cigarettes, Chesterfield, Lucky Strikes, and all them. Took me thirty days to get back to the 508 and when I did they were at Frankfurt, Germany, they were the honor guard for Eisenhower's headquarters. And I stayed there for a year. And then I was the first group of ninety people that reenlisted overseas and went regular army. You know, now I'm a temporary tech sergeant, but now I'm a regular army tech sergeant, what have you. So I stayed there a year, and then they shipped me back to the state side, said I couldn't stay over no more, they sent me to the 82nd Airborne Division in Ft. Bragg, to the 504, and I wound up as a battalion sergeant major of the 2nd Battalion of the 504 and from there... one thing, I've got a sketch of it over there in the kitchen... I've never talked about it, I took two years out of my army career. General Hamilton H. Howz was the division commander, and he'd go saw that when the war was

over, and General Gavin brought the 82nd back to Ft. Bragg, him and his aid was up on this hill where division headquarters is at now. And he said, "If the time ever comes, we should build an NCO club up on this hill," and General Hamilton called me up and said "I'm put you on special duty, I want you to build a million dollar NCO club on this hill." Each regiment had an NCO club and we had half a million dollars in the fund, we needed a million dollars to build the club and a swimming pool and a 500 car parking lot. So, I got a letter typed up to the Department of the Army for them to give me a draft of \$500,000, I went up there, I took another master sergeant with me to the Pentagon, talked to them. I had pictures, I had the division's NCO club over on Riley Road where they had horse stables and still had the watering troughs, and I said, "Here's what the best NCO's in your army have got. Here is a horse stable and that's where the NCO club is at. And we need something better. And I need half a million dollars." Well, they'd figured that all of the regiments had had these clubs, they were making money, so they come down and said, "We'll loan you \$500,000 dollars for 10 years at 4% interest." So I gave this report to the General and the General said, "Let's go for it." Here I am, I'm below the Master Sergeant and I sign for \$500,000! General Sink was the corps commander. When we'd started building the damn million dollar NCO club, Sink would come down, we called him Bourbon Bob. He had the 506 during the war when he jumped into Normandy. He'd come down there and I'd give him a drink of Bourbon in my room. And he'd say, "You've got any problems?" Well, what we'd forgot was a five-hundred car parking lot, and General Sink said, "What do you need?" I said, "Well, if we could get the engineers to level the field off and what have you, we could get it paved and marked for 80-90,000 dollars. But we don't have that money". He said, "Well I'm gonna send you back up there, and have them add 85,000 to your 500,000." Ok. He said, "I'm gonna send a lieutenant with you." I said, "Sir, I don't need no lieutenant." He said, "He'll open doors for you." Ok. Got on his plane, I flew down to 3rd Army, dropped him off there, flew up to Washington DC, and they gave me a check for 82,000 dollars and I come back. We build the damn club and that was, we opened Thanksgiving, 1958. And I think they closed it, I dunno, twenty years later... they paid off the loan of course. Now, when it was build I quit. I got out of the club business. They wouldn't promote me because I'm not in an E8 or and E9 spot, I'm an E7, a master sergeant E7, so I got out and got me a First Sergeant job, and, of course, got promoted to an E8 and then E9 and what have you. And they paid that 582,000 dollars off, not in the ten years but in five years. Here's what happened, they didn't support the club or what have you, and it wasn't even paying for itself then. The post took over, they took over all clubs at Ft. Bragg. The 82nd, before they'd had their own system, but now the Department of the Army said, "Ft Bragg will only have one club system." So they closed it down and the 82nd Division headquarters moved in there. Then here last, a couple years ago, they tore it down and built a new division headquarters right there where the NCO club was. And the sketches, right over my dining room table, in my kitchen there and what have you, beautiful. First million-dollar club built in the United States Army was built by Rock Merritt. And it took me two years to do that, borrow all the money and what have you.

Clarke: My question to you, to follow up on this, I've been sitting here trying to think of how to formulate it. And I guess the best way to formulate a question is a direct question,

Merritt: yes

Clarke: All your experience in WWII, from Normandy to Market Garden to the Battle of the Bulge, you told that one story of the P51 coming over and dropping a bomb on top of one of your guys. That fog of war, that confusion in battle, that not knowing where you are, how much did you find yourself contending with that?

Merritt: All the time. Yeah, but, we never gave up. Never. I never thought we'd lose, I knew we was gonna win, I just didn't know when, and what have you. Now, lot of people said, "Rock if I'd have been a platoon sergeant at the Battle of the Bulge I wouldn't have taken that ten day leave." I said, "Well, the Division Commander wanted me to go, and he put out the criteria and I met the criteria ..." I don't feel bad about it at all. "cuz I had a good man that replaced me, and he survived, so nothing happened like that. But to answer your questions, I don't think it ever leaves your mind. It's always there, you know

Clarke: So when you were getting together with your battle buddies, later down the road, was there a particular story you guys told? Maybe gallows-humor funny, or not so funny...? Was there one in particular that you found yourself repeating?

Merritt: Well, yeah, of course there were several. I mentioned one, I forget this platoon leaders name, he was a great platoon leader, he blew the bridge at Vielsalm. And they sent out a patrol, a lieutenant and a sergeant and somebody else, I forget who, during the Battle of the Bulge. We're having a reunion in Daytona Beach, Florida, six-hundred and some-odd people, this was in the early 80s you know, we had a lot of veterans then, and so we assembled for this welcoming breakfast, six hundred people. And the guy, after they'd said the invocation, I heard a guy say, "Sergeant So-and-so, A Company So-and-so, reporting, Sir!" This was one of the guys the Sergeant had sent on long range patrol at the Battle of the Bulge, they thought he was dead! So this Lieutenant that got to the DSC and blew the bridge, the one who'd sent him out, he rose and said, "Come up here and report, come up!" he said, the Sergeant. The guys said "What happened to Lt. So and so?" this guy said, "I shot the son of a bitch, Sir." "Why?" "Because he was gonna surrender, he wanted to surrender us, and I didn't want to surrender, so I killed him." That's what he actually said! 'I killed him'! So anyway, I thought that was really, well it had to be true! Because he said, the other guy, the three of them went, he killed the Lieutenant because he wanted to surrender, and I guess sooner or later they'd captured him too, or what have you. That was just one of them, I heard. But you heard many of those stories, you know. And some of them have got a lot of humor to them. We were in Ireland, right? And Ireland had been bombed. And we were on guard with live ammunition. And in the old Army, the guardhouse was post number 1. I'm a corporal, it's my relief, it's on, I'm at the guardhouse. And we didn't have telephones. That's where you said you had twelve posts, guards. Number 12 was sergeant, at 12 o'clock. Number 12, post number 12, all ok. It went all the way to number one. Louis G Mendez, 3rd Commanding Officer of the 3rd Battalion, 508. He had a tendency to wake up at four o'clock in the morning and go around and check guards and stuff like that. So he comes to post number 1. The same guy from Arkansas, the one that told me the five hundred pound bomb had fell, was on guard. Somehow or another, Mendez couldn't think of the damn password. I'm sitting there and I'm listening to all this, because its post number 1 and that's my man sitting out there. So I hear him talking, you know, and I hear, "well Colonel Co-and-so, who won the such-and such World Series?" "Hell, I don't know who won the World Series in Such-and-such!" So finally he says, "Soldier, are you gonna do something?" And he said "Yes, Sir," and he threw a round in, I

heard it go in the chamber, and said, "Sir, prepare thyself to be shot". I come out of that thing, how do you prepare yourself to be shot? I come out and sad "Turley, Turley, hold on!" And so, Mendez says, "You know, your guy is doing good, he's doing real good." I said, "Turley, would you have shot him?" He said, "I don't know, I don't know if I would've shot him or not. But I got somebody's attention, didn't I?" So anyway, that was one that I tell that a lot, because old [Carroll of WV; Merritt's revision] he was smart. He just died here, last year...But anyway.

Clarke: So you got married in 1943?

Merritt: Yes.

Clarke: So the war is on and you're getting married?

Merritt: Yeah.

Clarke: How did you meet her?

Merritt: When I was in the CC camp, she was in the NYA, National Youth Association. Young ladies I guess, where they did things...I don't know...made clothes...I dunno. Or whatever they done. But I had a sister in the NYA, and I went down to see her, and I seen this blonde headed girl, Sally, sitting there, and I ask, "Who's that?" and so she introduced me. And what have you-that was in '41. So you know, I joined the army a year later in '42, but we corresponded back and forth. I got only two leaves, two ten day leaves. The first one after jump school and the second one when I got married, you know. I had a good army wife. I was a corps sergeant major of seven corps commanders, seven! There's a lot of social functions when you're dealing with seven corps commanders. And she always came and she always sat at the head table next to the general. She didn't care whether she sat next to a PFC [Private First Class] or a general: she'd talk to him about catfishing or farming and anything she wanted: it didn't bother her, see. So you'd never know that she was a corps sergeant major's wife when she was at some function, and she stayed with the army...sent her out there, helping people coming in on the post, and all that good stuff, you know. When they sent me to Vietnam, when I had thirty years in the Army, and only four months out of Korea, you'd normally say, she'd just raise all sorts of hell and what have you, but she understood. She understood the army and what have you. Yeah, she stayed the whole, of the thirty-six years in the Army she stayed thirty-five years married to me, in the Army. She was a good, good army wife. You know, like I say, I was overseas fourteen years out of thirty-six. Both my boys got God and Country awards, I mean both of them are Eagle Scouts. Both of them are the God and Country, and she done that, not me. She's done all that, you know.

Clarke: So the war is over and you reenlisted: how did that go over?

Merritt: Didn't go over too good with my wife. No, she didn't like it at all, no. She was pregnant with my first son, because I'd come home on leave, after I'd become regular army they gave me ninety day leave, you know. But anyway, then I went back to Germany and I'm gonna bring her over, you know, they even assigned me quarters for her, I'll never forget the number: 222 Huffledoffle Strasse, Heidenheim[?] on the Main, Germany. A nice set of quarters. But then, the army transporting British

war brides, all the babies and people got sick on the plane: so, they issued an order that if you were pregnant more than five months or four months or so and so, you couldn't fly. So they cancelled her orders to come over, and these quarters that I got. So when they did, they called me up and said, "So she can't come over, so do you want to stay over here?" So I asked, "What options do I have?" He said, "Well, you've been over here over three years, so they're gonna make you go back anyways, so I can send you back now to the 82nd Airborne Division at Ft. Bragg." So that's when I left and joined the 504 when I come back, you know. So anyway, from there, I got quarters on the post, I'm a tech sergeant, you know, then in '49 I made master sergeant, and what have you. By now, everything is going pretty good, I'm making enough money to have a new car and drive it around, and my wife is right in the middle of it, you know, ready to go, and we had the second son. And then, I had five years later, I had a daughter, I have two sons and a daughter. Kenny is the oldest one, Jerry is the Colonel, the retired Colonel. Diane, she's 64 now, she's having troubles with men. She married some of those snake eaters, I call them there. The Special Forces, and they just didn't get along and what have you. Now she's living alone and what have you, given up on men. I think she was trying to find one like her dad and she couldn't find one like her dad, so she just gave up on them. But she's doing all right, now.

Clarke: What do you think now, as you reflect back, it sounds like you know, your family they stayed with you, your wife, your kids, how do you think your service impacted them, positive or negative?

Merritt: Yeah, probably, but see, I only took my family overseas, the one time, and that was to Panama. And I didn't even take the boys, they were both in college, but I took my daughter. And my oldest son, I think until this day, he blames me for not letting him be in the Army. He's the one that had the collapsed lung. When they were fixing to draft him, he had to take his physical, I was in Panama. And I had twenty-six doctors in my outfit, and I'm their sergeant major, twenty-six doctors. You name them, they had them, you know, veterinarians and what have you. And I'm there, and this doctor he calls me and he says "Sergeant Major, I've got your son down here. And we can go either way," this was in '67, right at the height of the Vietnam War, '67. "But I can defer him, too, whatever you think we should do." I said, "Defer him; I don't want him to go." First place, I didn't believe in the Vietnam War. I should've, I'm an army sergeant, but I didn't believe in the Vietnam War. And I knew that they would make him one of them grunts or what have you, go in them holes over there, and probably get killed. But he loved the army, you know, and of course he wanted to go in the army. He would have went in as a private. Now my other son, he went in with a degree, so he went in as a second lieutenant to start with. It's a big difference. So anyway, I would say they loved their dad being in the army. Because all of their friends here in Fayetteville, their dads are majors and sergeant majors and colonels and what have you, so anyway. I would say to answer your question, that the enjoyed the army. Period. Kenny didn't go. He'll tell you today, he wanted to go. Bad. You know. And like I say, who knows. He could've done good, he could've gotten killed, or what have you. But I made the decision, and that's one I'll have to live with.

Clarke: Well you mentioned you didn't believe in the Vietnam War, but you ended up over there?

Merritt: Yeah.

Clarke: What did you do over there?

Merritt: Let me tell you about that. I come back from Korea. I'd been back four or five months from Korea. Army regulation says when you come back from an undesired tour, they've got to give you a year back in the States before they can reassign you. They have at the Pentagon, what they call the Command Sergeant Major's branch. It's run by a colonel and a sergeant major and his staff. They control all the command sergeant majors in the army, which is possibly one percent. I'm a sergeant major in the 82nd Airborne Division, DivCom sergeant major. He called one day and he said, "Rock, this is Sergeant Major So-and-So, at my desk now," I said, "Yep." He said, "We have a lieutenant general, up here, whose primary mission in life is to see that every command sergeant major has a tour in Vietnam. You haven't been. I can't move you, because according to regulation I've got to give you a year in the States and you've only been back five months or something, but, you can waiver that. If you sign a waiver I've got a good job for you. If you don't you may have to wait a year, and you may wind up as a battalion sergeant major in one of the infantry battalions over there on the front lines. And with your record, you don't deserve that, you know?" I said, "What is the assignment?" He said, "Cam Ranh Bay, Sergeant Major. Cam Ranh Bay" I said, "All right. I'll send you a 1049. It'll be on your desk in the next hour. I'll take the assignment." So I did, I took the assignment, I didn't tell Sally that, you know... she said, "Well you know, it seems to me that they should have given you some more time," I said, "Well, evidently they need someone bad real fast." That's all she said about it, but I think she had the idea that something was wrong, something wasn't right. But anyway, I go to Cam Ranh Bay, they've got more Cam Ranh Bay than we had back at Fort Bragg! Massage parlors, NCO club, EM club, you name it! Ice cream parlor, ice cream factory to be exact! Everything you can think of they have at Cam Ranh Bay, and I'm the command master sergeant in Cam Ranh Bay. I'm drawing what you call combat pay, forty dollars or fifty a month for living in a combat zone. The whole thirteen months I was in Cam Ranh Bay, we had one attack. One single North Vietnamese came through the barracks, of the people that we had already processing to go home...anyway he comes through with his little shorts on and his little satchel, and he just charges in through there. Jesus Christ, the headquarters went crazy. All the staff telling the generals we were under attack and this and that. And so I got in my jeep and I come to headquarters, and they've got the command post going. You know, and the generals tell me, "Sergeant Major, go down to the hospital and see what you can find out." We had a hospital tent, so I drive down there to see this first sergeant and he told me what happened. They'd turned their weapons in, because they were going home the next day. He said he'd seen the guy go by, and he'd seen all these women, and I said, "Women?" and he said, "Those are the prostitutes who were in those barracks when that guy came through!" and this first sergeant, his face was bloody a little bit but he wasn't really hurt that bad. So I said, "Where'd the guy go?" he said, "He's gone. Nobody got off a shot or nothing. Nobody even had their own private loaded weapon." So I went back and told the General, "General, at the hospital, there are seven or eight women down there who have some minor scratches, and a first sergeant." He said, "What women, what are they doing?" I said, "Sir, they get through the fences and go into the barracks, you know, wherever a soldier is, you're going to find a woman somewhere along the line." So, I said, "You go back to bed, it's all over with." That was the only incident in the 13 months that I was over in Cam Ranh Bay. But that's how it came into being Cam Ranh Bay

Clarke: What I want to know is, you've been the Command Sergeant Major of the, 18th corps?

Merritt: 18th Airborne Corps?

Clarke: Twice

Merritt: Yeah, only free airborne corps in the world.

Clark: Twice?

Merritt: Yep, twice,

Clarke: and that's not very common to do twice, right?

Merritt: Well, a lot of people don't know this, but I'm gonna tell you anyway, up until 1964, the only units in the army that was authorized a sergeant major was regimental headquarters. Period. Division wasn't authorized one. Corps wasn't authorized one. None. In 1964, corps, and division and army was authorized a sergeant major in the army. So with that said, I first made Sergeant Major of the 18th Airborne Corps February the 2nd of 1962. I made E9 Sergeant Major, keep in mind that that the general corps commander was not authorized a sergeant major. I am a Sergeant Major E9, working for the command group, to the secretary general staff in the 71-Lima administrative MOS staff but, the General used me also as his command sergeant major, although he wasn't authorized one. Same way with the Division, they all done that, when Perry tells you "All right Sergeant, Sergeant Major," you do it, even though he wasn't authorized one." But 1964, they authorized one. I had the rights, the duties, of a command sergeant major. Me and a guy named Major North which was secretary general staff of the XVIII Airborne Corps from 1962-1964, we wrote that thing and then they came out with it. So basically, as an authorized command sergeant major, I served from 1964 to 1966. The second time from 1973 to 1977. Anyway, you take away '92 and '93, those two years I was an E9, rated by the Secretary General's staff, and endorsed by the Chief of Staff. Not the Commanding General. But when I became the Commanding General's Sergeant Major, he rated me. Period. Hank Emerson, the guy who gave me this gun. I'll never forget, he rated me and he sent it in, and it's all that stuff you know. Max was 125, that's the max that a command sergeant major could be. You fill out the blocks, Hank Emerson, he didn't even fill out the blocks. He wrote in his handwriting across there: "This man is pure gold-- Hank Emerson." That's how he endorsed mine, and what have you. So anyway, that's my story on, uh, General Howz, he used me as his sergeant major, I was not his sergeant major because he left before that, he left before that, I was not authorized until 1964, period. All the rest of em, Period. And I told you some were in the 504. I was a battalion sergeant major, I was 71-lima [71L] Staff Sergeant, I was a sergeant major to the Colonel. He used me as his sergeant major. But I really was not authorized until 1964.

Clarke: So, the enlisted ranks when you get up to that level, super important. But a lot of people don't understand it, I would say. They understand what a general does, or even what a colonel does. Explain to me what a command sergeant major does, and why it's so important?

Merritt: I don't think none of them knew, because in 1964 they come out authorizing the command sergeant position, I got a letter all corps sergeant majors and division sergeant majors got a letter from a

secretary of the Army, asking us to write the duties of a command sergeant major. The whole, everybody, from a division, what have we got? Ten divisions, three or four corps, thirteen or fourteen letters that they had to write and send back to the secretary of the army. So I wrote one on the duties of a command sergeant major, and what have you. Basically, the duties of a command sergeant major: he is the eyes and the ears of all enlisted men, what's going on in the Army. And if he knows something about an officer or what have you, and is doing something wrong, it's your responsibility to tell that commander that. Period. And that has happened, that has happened. And then, it goes on down and tell the command sergeant major the welfare of all of the enlisted men, and what have you. Basically, he should be able to tell the commanding general everything that goes on in the 18th Airborne Corps, enlisted personnel is concerned. The complaints and all that good stuff, and what have you. I used to, I'd just go in unannounced, when I was a corps sergeant major, sit down and, that's when you can find stuff out, when you're a command sergeant major. They ain't gonna, no PFC is gonna sit down and ask the command sergeant major for advice or something. They're scared to death of one, period, you know, what have you. So anyway, I don't know if the secretary- they may have- of the Army took all those fifteen letters and come up with the duties of a command sergeant major and what have you. I don't know that. I'm quite sure there's one somewhere around, and it's probably made up from those corps sergeant majors and the ten division sergeant majors that made up that stuff, you know.

Clarke: So as far as the enlisted leadership goes...what is you're feeling about enlisted leadership? What does it really need to do?

Merritt: Well, once you become a lead battalion, and once you get higher, you almost lost control of any enlisted personnel in the division. If you're a brigade command sergeant major, and you want to talk to the 1st Battalion by the way, then you've got to come down through that battalion, to come talk to them, or what have you. Or when your battalion became Sergeant Major, he got control of, normally right now there's six companies in a battalion, six first sergeants that battalion's got, and what have you. All he's got to say is "I want to talk to Charlie's company, tomorrow morning, any time" He can do it. Now, today when I retired, there was 4 star general said to me, "Rock, in all your years of service, what was the most prestigious job you ever held?" I said, "The seven years that I was first sergeant." He said, "Why is it that I knew you was gonna say that?" All sergeant majors will tell you, if you put it through the process of being that first sergeant, before he made E9, he'll find that he got more prestige as a first sergeant that he did as a sergeant major. A first sergeant has two-hundred people, he sees them, every day. He knows everybody by their first name and their last name. Two-hundred of them. Now the sergeant major, outside, even the battalion sergeant major, don't know that many people. But, the first sergeant does, see. I go along, I put him in the same category as General Bradley puts a squad leader. A first sergeant job, compared to a sergeant major's job, if a sergeant major is honest with you, he'll tell you that the first sergeant's got a harder job than the sergeant major has, period. You know. So anyway...I think, today, I had a talk the other day, to fifty command sergeant majors from all over the United States, civil affairs group, several civil affairs groups, colonels and generals from all over the fifty states, you know, and the sergeant majors assembled here. And my talk to them was about squad leaders. Squad leaders, I told them, squad leaders aren't going to come up here and ask you anything. He's scared to death of you, you know, period. And let alone ask you questions. You need to get

involved with them, you know, and tell them. They need help, and they need it from you people, right here. They get their help from the first sergeant. They live with the first sergeant. They do not live with the sergeant major, that's the thing. Today, once they get used to you, when I first started talking to the squad leaders, I'd ask when I got through if they had questions. I might get one question. Now, if my talk is thirty minutes, then I get almost thirty minutes of questions. And that's good. This is the second or third time I've talked to this company or what have you. And they're good questions, good questions from squad leaders, and they need to know. I'll give you an example: this one buck sergeant, he said, "Sergeant Major, in your experience, when you were a squad leader, some thousand years ago," I'm quoting him, he said, "What can I do to impress my troops that I'm a good squad leader? In your mind, what can I do?" I said, "That's a good question. First thing I'd say, you cannot show partiality to any man in that squad. Cause you've got a pet peeve or something." I said, "I've seen company commanders, battalion commanders relieved because they've shown preference to one company over another, or one platoon over another. Tell them you're on the level with them. They're not dumb. When you get a bunch of men together, some of them are gonna to be smart. You're on the level with them and what have you. Period. And ask their advice on something, and what have you." So anyway, I answered him and whatever two or three times. But they're out there asking good questions, and that's because you went back and talked to them good. The other day, I was at Walmart, buying some groceries or something, and this young kid in plain clothes, you can tell an Army brat almost from his haircut and the way he dresses. He said, "Are you Rock Merritt?" I said "Yeah." "I heard you talk to the squad leaders once, and I was a squad leader, he said, "And I went to Afghanistan and I used some of your remarks. And I'm gonna tell you, it helped me, and I am now a staff sergeant, a buck sergeant." Well, that makes you feel good! And that's only one man, but it makes you feel good that he listened to it. My point to these fifty command sergeant majors, "You can't sit in that office all day long and say you've done your job that you're a command sergeant major and you don't have to do this. You've got all these squad leaders and all these young people down there, you've got all these young first sergeants that need some help. Now a first sergeant, normally, if he needs help, he'll go over and he'll say, "Hey, I need some help on this," to an old first sergeant, I was first sergeant seven years. That is the highest rank you had in the Army, except, well the regimental sergeant major was three up and three down, sergeant major was three up, three down, and a diamond in the middle, and they both drew the same pay. So in the seven years I was a first sergeant, no one was drawing higher pay than me. Then in the years when they came up with 8 and 9s, in 1958 and 1959 they came up with the grades 8 and 9, what have you. So anyway, to answer your question, I think we've got too many senior NCOs that need to get down with the troops and what have you. But like I say, lot of times they've got to go back down through the chain of command to talk to them, but I tell everyone I talk to, the new battalion commanders, I tell them, "Hey, Sir, I'm here to help you. If you're running short on a class and you need someone to come out and talk to you, I'll come out and talk to you." I say, "My favorite subject is squad leaders, but I'll talk on anything on leadership traits or leadership." I tell these squad leaders, "Get to regulation on leadership traits and leadership experience and training. Print it down and put it in your wallet, it'll help you." So they have done that. And so, you know, I've got these two battalions, 2nd Battalion and 1st Battalion of the 508, going good out of Ft. Bragg, what have you.

Clarke: So you're a sky soldier. You maintained your jump status for thirty-one years, and I want to ask you about that, in a second. But before I do that, I want to ask, how does someone that jumps out of planes and maintains jump status for thirty-one years get a nickname like 'Rock'? Where does that come from?

Merritt: Well, it really comes from the CC camp.

Clarke: Oh it does?

Merritt: It goes back that far. And it was Hard Rock. The man that changed it to Rock was Hank Emerson when he came to Ft. Bragg. I was known not by Rock, but by Hard Rock. And in the CC camp, like I said, there were seventeen or eighteen year-old people. And you had to be tough to stay with that group, they either liked you or...but one way or another, I just picked up Hard Rock from a kid from Oklahoma, and how it leaked into the Army I don't know. But it did, and everybody called me Hard Rock, all the way through. And then Emerson came, and there was a General named Throckmorton, his name was Rock, Hard Rock. And Emerson served under him as a second lieutenant, first lieutenant. When I came in, he said, "One of the finest men I ever served under was Rock Throckmorton, so I'm gonna call you Rock," and I said, "All right," so he did. Anyway, Hank Emerson, out of the seven commanders that I was a sergeant major with, he, I guess, he was different from all of them. But he supported me more than any of them did too, in fact, he went a little bit overboard. Cause the day he took command, he called a commanders' meeting in the big commanders conference room, and I'm the only enlisted man there sitting with him. And he tells the people, "Rock here, my Sergeant Major, I'm gonna tell you right now, he has the authority to relieve any command sergeant major that you've got in your command." I'm sitting there with two commanding generals, two star generals! And I'm gonna relieve their sergeant majors? That's what Emerson said to them people, what have you. So then he said, when he got through, he told them, "All you people, all you little fat boys," He said, "You gonna be able... I'm gonna give you ninety days to run four miles under thirty-two minutes, or I'm taking you off jump status." So he got through, so he said, "Rock, follow me into the office I want to talk to you." So I was standing there and he said, "That doesn't apply to you." I said, "Yes, it does!" I'll run it. I've been doing it every goddamn day anyway, I knew I could run it there if I had to. I said, "Oh no, General, I'll run that in under thirty-two or I'll retire. That's your order and I'm gonna do it." And he said, "Okay" Now he said, "Don't you volunteer and run with these units, they normally run four miles a day, and don't you volunteer me! They ain't not gonna run four miles a day. They're gonna run ten, and then they're gonna say, "We ran the Corps Commander and the Corps Sergeant Major into the ground, they dropped out at the seventh or eighth mile."

Clarke: So what does it actually take to maintain jump status for 31 years?

Merritt: Well, for years if you was Airborne, and you had assignment to Europe or someplace, you normally got an airborne assignment. But when they come up with the 8's and 9's, in '58 and '59, then if they wanted a hospital in a DISCOM [Division Support Command] or an engineering outfit, and it was not airborne, and it was in Panama, that's where you went. So that kind of stopped. But, up until that time, from say 1942-1959, '58-'59, 99% you got airborne assignments all the time. That went out the

window back in 'Nam, in those days. Also, we didn't have central assignments up until then. The Korean War, a good example, in '50, in '51, '52. They said, "Rock, why didn't you go to Korea?" Nobody ever asked for me. Period. Because the Division would send down and say, "We need fifteen 11-Bravos to go to Korea," and I'm a battalion sergeant major and they'd come down to me, and my quota was five. And I'd call first sergeants in and, believe it or not, in the Korean War, we had volunteers stacked up waiting, wanting to volunteer and go! You never had to detail someone, normally, unless you was asking for a platoon sergeant or a section sergeant. Normally, if you were asking for Private, PFC, Spec 4, all of them wanted to go to Korea, what have you. So the units controlled who went over there, see, period. And nobody ever asked, said, "Well we need a 72-Lima, master sergeant E7," No one ever asked for me. So I never went. And I certainly wasn't going to volunteer, because I didn't agree with what was going on over there. I'd've have gone. If someone had asked me, I'd've went. It's that simple. So anyway, I got a lot of good assignments. Like one time, the other day, before I retired, there was sergeant major that told me, "Rock, you've had the best goddamn assignments of any sergeant major in the army. How'd you do it?" I said, "I've never asked for an assignment in my life. Ever. They just happen to be that way, and it happens to be where you've at the same time." That's the same was with the Chief of Staff of the Army. You pick a Chief of Staff of the Army and he comes and he had a division for two years and his sergeant major there, he normally is going to select him to be the sergeant major of the Army. That's the way it goes. I was selected Sergeant Major of the Army and Westmorland, I was his sergeant major right here in Ft. Bragg, North Carolina. He sent me a nice letter and he said, "I considered you, but you know I picked sergeant Major Dunnaway, he was my sergeant major for two years." And I said, "I know that and what have you." So anyway, it's wherever you're at at the time, I guess it goes the same way in civilian life, I would imagine, if you're in a good position there they get you, and what have you. But anyway, I never asked for them, I just got them. And like I say, I drew jump thirty-one out of the thirty-two years I was in the 36th. But I never drew nothing like they're drawing today! The highest mine was fifty dollars a month, I started at fifty dollars, I got thirty years later I got a five dollar raise, that it. Today, what is it, I think, Two-hundred and fifty dollars a month! And when I was in there, an officer would draw double! Now I think they all draw the same thing because the NCOs used to complain about that. But now, I think all the jump masters in today's Army, are not officers, they're senior noncommissioned officers that jump, so anyway.

Clarke: So you got the Silver Star for D-Day stuff, the machine gun that you took out. What other awards and citation did you receive, combat infantry badge I would imagine at least three times?

Merritt: yeah I got that. No, I only got that once. Well, I got them in there on that thing, about thirty of them I guess. I got the Bronze Star about...three times. I got a Master Wings, and I got Century Wings somewhere in there, and that's one-hundred. And, of course, I guess of all them medals hanging on that wall, the Silver Star, Combat Infantry Badge, and the Master Parachutist, those are the three that are important to me, really. And of course, you know, once you get, you've got to be sergeant major of a brigade or under to get a Combat Infantry Star. If you're up at division or corps level, you don't get it for that, although you may be in combat. You've gotta be down at the battalion or regiment level to get that. That's all right, you know. But anyway, now this, I like this Dough Boy Award that they gave me. That shows that that's the highest award they give out honoring the infantrymen, and the Doughboy

Award, where it came from, was down in Texas. In that clay down there and in the dust, and the rain, and it looked like a dough man walking around with all that dust and rain on him, and they picked up the nickname doughboy. And, I forget who was the first one to get that...but they give one to an enlisted man, one to an officer, and one to a civilian, every year. And they vote on it, you know, and I didn't think I had a chance, you know. But evidently, you look at the list, that've got that thing: 4 star generals, Bob Hope, so on down the line. All the people alive they get to vote on it every year and what have you. But I guess, I was the only man on there from WWII, maybe that helped, I don't know. But anyway, that ended up nice, and I appreciate it.

Clarke: I read about how you received a pistol from one of your commanders

Merritt: Yeah.

Clarke: And there's quite a story there, so, I'm wondering if you'll tell me a little bit about it, because you alluded to it a little bit earlier in the conversation and we have it here with us.

Merritt: Yeah, we have. This job right here, Hank Emerson had two of them. He said only one of them had killed a Gook, and then he said...well, let me start this minute. He liked this, I forget this Colonel's name every time, Jesus Christ, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff...Anyway, he was, Emerson wanted this Colonel to be the Commander of troops, and he was the Commander of the 327 down in at Ft. Campbell, Kentucky, he wanted Rock Merritt to be the Sergeant Major of the troops at his retirement. So time comes, we practice and everything, comes Emerson's retirement, the band was there, and he steps up onto the stage, they're playing honors to the General and all that. And he threw up his hands and said, "Hold it! I woke up this morning and thought, only one man is worthy of wearing two pistols, and that was George Patton," he said. And he said, "Then I thought: Who am I gonna give my other one to?' Only one of them has killed a Gook." And he said, "I went back to sleep, and then when I woke up this morning it dawned on me, I'm gonna give it to my right hand man, Rock Merritt." Now keep in mind he's the one who selected me to be the Sergeant Major. So he turns to his aid and says, "Where's Rock?" He said, "Sir, he's out there." And I'm standing out there with this old Colonel, and he says, "Rock, hold up your hand" and we're at attention! I'm standing there holding my hand up, you know, out there. So he says, "All right, come up here, Rock!" And it's a long way from the parade field to where the review stand was. And I've got an Army .forty five on and what have you. I double-timed up there and reported. So he takes this pistol off and he took my .forty five and goes to put it in mine, and it won't fit in that holster. Keep in mind, we left the troops standing out there at attention, ten thousand troops from Fayetteville standing out there, and he turned around and said, "Where's the holster to this?" and "In the sedan, Sir" And the sedan, it's parked behind the review, and he says, "Go get it" So they run out there, get it, and come back, and he shot it, put it on my belt, it took some time. Slapped it in there, and he hugged me, and I thought he was gonna kiss me, you know? So he hugged me and then he said, "Take your post" So, meantime, I'm doubling it all the way back to the field to take my damn post. Anyway, the next morning, he comes by, and gave me two boxes, one-hundred rounds of ammunition per one, for the weapon. And I've had this weapon ever since. I've never fired it yet, and what have you, but anyway. I'll keep it I guess, until I die. And, by the way, my friend Emerson, I think

he died here a couple years ago, and what have you. I can't think of that Colonel's name...that's what happens when you're getting to almost ninety-four years old...

Clarke: No, I can't either, you said it earlier and I can't remember it and I'm not ninety-four

Merritt: We'll find it

Clarke: So, you were, Omar Bradley, General Omar Bradley was pretty influential on your life.

Merritt: Yeah, he was.

Clarke: He actually asked you to do some things in your retirement days. I'm wondering if you'll share that story with us.

Merritt: I will, well, I'd be glad to. Braxton-Bragg, in the '70s, was the largest chapter of the AUSA [Association of United States Army] in the history. And it was in '77, I went up there and I took with me, there were sixteen major commands that reported directly to 18th Airborne Corps in '77. So that meant we had sixteen soldiers of the year, 82nd and the 101st you name them all, you know. So we would take them to the AUSA, we'd pay for it, and take them to the normal annual AUSA meeting in October every year, at the Sheridan Park Hotel. In '77, they always give a Sergeant Major's Luncheon-and I'm headed to this luncheon, dressed in greens, and I pass General Bradley sitting in a big chair, a Lt. General standing by his side and a nurse. And as I walked by, the aid come and said, "General Bradley wants to talk to you." So I went over there and saluted him and said, "Yes, Sir" and he stood up and he said, "I see by your uniform that you got, that you served in Europe [during World War II]." And I said, "Yes, Sir," and he said, "What was your job?" I said, "In Normandy, Sir, I was a squad leader, and Operation Market Garden, I was a section leader, and in the Battle of the Bulge I was a platoon leader, platoon sergeant." That's when he said, "You know, squad leader have the toughest job in the army." I said, "Yes, Sir. I know, I was one for over a year, and so," I said, "I have sixteen of them with me that are soldiers of the year, with major commands at Ft. Bragg" And he said, "I'd like to talk to them." I said, "Yes, Sir, just let me know" and he said, "What about one o'clock this afternoon, right here." I said, "Yes, Sir" So I rounded them up, and told them, I taught them how to salute, and how to report to a five-star general, he's the last five-star general alive. And I brought them down in single file, right in front of him, and I asked him, "Sir, you want to talk to them in a group or single, one-on-one?" and he said, "Oh, I want to talk to them one-on-one" Yes, sir. So my guys reported to them, and he asked them the same questions, every one of them. "Soldier, what's your MOS?" "Eleven-Bravo, Sir" that's when he said, "You know, that's the toughest job in the army. He's the first to see the enemy, the buck stops with him, if anything he's last to see the enemy. He should know if a soldier in his squad is going to go AWOL or is going to commit suicide, he knows all that." And you know, they all said, "Yes, Sir, yes, Sir." He went through all of them. And every year, 1977, I mean 1973, I meant '73 when I started. Every year from 1973 to 1977, I would take the sixteen major command soldiers of the year up to meet General Bradley, and he always told the same thing. He never pushed the recruiting on them, you know, the, "You've got to stay in the Army." He, merely, stated that the Army's got some good things, if you've have a problem in civilian life, try the Army. So he never did push that, he was a five-star general. So the last trip I had with him was in October of 1977 before I retired in November. And I understand he died down in Texas, I think in the

year of 1981, somewhere around there. But that was my experience. And he also asked me to continue, I told him I was talking to the squad leaders, to continue, because he said, "Sergeant Major, they need help. And you're the people, sergeant majors like you. And they need help to help these squad leaders." So you know, he was a dedicated man. They called him the Soldiers' General, I guess. So, you know...

Clarke: So he asked you to keep up the good work even if you were retired?

Merritt: He did, yes he did. I told him I would as long as I could. And up to this point I have.

Clarke: You're still doing it

Merritt: I feel that I have accomplished everything that General Bradley asked me to do

Clarke: There's probably a little bit of that in what you're doing with me today, to get that story out there

Merritt: Yes, sir.

Clarke: So you retired, you said you retired in '77?

Merritt: Yep.

Clarke: How did you feel about retirement and how have you thought about things since then?

Merritt: Well, of course, when I first joined the Army, and then the regular Army, my goal them was, maybe I'll be dead when I get twenty years in or when I get thirty years in, I'll retire. But when the time come, and I got an additional five years and I'm now, thirty-six years in the Army, I didn't want to retire, I wanted to stay on. And I could've stayed on another five years. Of course now, like I told you, you can stay on forty years, a good sergeant major can, on assignment, you know. But what have you. I was not ready to retire, financially, or, I was in good health- hell I'm still in good health, period. Far as I know. I've got a good doctor, I see him every 90 days, and turns me loose for another 90 days and what have you. I can still walk 3 or 4 miles, if I have to. And I do a lot of gardening, you know, I do a lot of canning tomatoes and cucumbers and green beans and all that good stuff. I do have a girl that comes in and helps me with that stuff, but Sally taught me good, I can do it myself when I have to. I got out and sold houses for a while after I got out. I worked at Ft. Bragg as a GS 8 for a couple of years, and I was not cut out to be a house salesman, I did not like it. I had the masters certificate, I wasn't just a salesman, but I thought myself, "I pulled 30 years in the army, and here I am on a Sunday afternoon housesitting, for people coming through looking at houses, like they've put me on detail, so I have to quit this." So when I become 62, I joined social security and I said, "I'm going to quit and what have you." but I still stayed up with my contact at Ft. Bragg, and stayed up with all the social activity and what have you. I guess, I guess Ft. Bragg has got the social list of I think A, B, and C. A is I guess generals and mayors and stuff, and B is probably soldiers, and C is probably the whole goddamn city of Fayetteville, I don't know. But I think I'm probably on the A, I get invited to all of them. So anyway, I keep on doing it until where I can't you know, what have you. I will say, in my opinion, today's armed forces are the best-trained, the best

educated officers and noncommissioned officers today that our army has ever produced. When you see a man on the streets, walking in town, who's a sergeant major, he's got a college education or he wouldn't have gotten promoted. You've got to have a college education now to get promoted to sergeant major, and I don't know what it is for first sergeant, probably the same thing, I don't know. But to have a degree to get to be a command sergeant major? That's well educated. So anyway, I'd say with all the turmoil that the army's got today, we've still have so much that we can be proud of. We've got the best army we've ever had. We live in the best country in the world and we've got our freedom.

Clarke: Yes, Sir, thanks to people like you. I thank you very much for having us in your home today to do this. It was a good long conversation, hopefully, it didn't go on too long, wear out our welcome! You've got a gun to grab!

Merritt: Haha, yeah, [2:17:36]