

## Transcription: Orby Ledbetter

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*Today is January 10<sup>th</sup>, 2012. My name is James Crabtree, and this afternoon I'll be interviewing Mr. Orby Ledbetter. This interview is being conducted by telephone. Mr. Ledbetter is at his home in Victoria, Texas, and I'm in the General Land Office Building in Austin, Texas. This interview is being conducted in support of the Texas Veterans Land Board Voices of Veterans Oral History Program. Sir, thank you very much for taking the time to let us interview you today. It's an extreme honor for us. The first question I always like to start with, sir, is if you just tell us a little bit about your childhood and your life before you went in the military.*

**Orby Ledbetter:** I was born to my dad, Arvis E. Ledbetter and Frances Christian on July 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1921. I was out at the airport in a tent with a wooden floor. That was the oil boom started in Brackenridge, Texas, and housing \_\_\_\_\_. But my dad was building a house at that time, so we hadn't finished the house and we still lived in a tent, and at the City of Brackenridge, Davis County, and I had one young brother, Gerald Ledbetter, and he passed away in '07, and my dad worked in the oil field in north Texas and the oil boom. He worked in Arkansas and Oklahoma, and New Mexico and also. I was raised in the oil fields. When I got back out of the Army, I worked for Continental Oil Company, worked there 38-1/2 years, Benavides, Yorktown, and Flatonia.

*That's great. So you mentioned sir you had one sibling?*

**Orby Ledbetter:** Yup, one sibling.

*And you were born in 1921.*

**Orby Ledbetter:** Right.

*So when the war started, you were 20 years old.*

**Orby Ledbetter:** Yeah, about. I'd been in the National Guard. I joined the National Guard in 1937.

*What was it that made you want to join the National Guard when you did?*

**Orby Ledbetter:** They paid \$12 every three months, a dollar every Monday night, and I was an old country boy. I was living with my grandparents at that time, and my mother died when I was 10 years old, but I was raised with both my aunts. I lived with my grandparents and that \$12 a month, that was good money. All my friends were joining the National Guard, so I wanted to be with them and go to camp.

*Where did they send you for your training?*

**Orby Ledbetter:** Well, we stayed there and we trained in Brackenridge. But we went to camp every summer in August, went to Louisiana at Camp Brookguard and Fort Brookguard there, and there come a hurricane through there, and went to Camp Louis, Pelasus, Texas. Then other years, three or four years I went to Louisiana. I walked all over Louisiana.

*When the war started heating up in Europe and the Nazis and Hitler started advancing into other countries, was your unit activated before the United States went to war?*

**Orby Ledbetter:** Yeah, November the 25<sup>th</sup>, 1940. We were activated, went to Brownwood, Texas, and we stayed at Brownwood there 14 months, but Pearl Harbor Day, I was supposed to get discharged November the 25<sup>th</sup>, but they kind of lagged it over and so we still, my discharge went under the table when Pearl Harbor. I was Corporal of the Guard, at an ammunition dump at night. They come out there and wanted the ammunition because the Japanese was at the edge of Brownwood they thought. But major, he come out there and told them to go back to town.

*Now when Pearl Harbor was bombed, and you were there on active duty, how did you learn about it?*

**Orby Ledbetter:** That's when everybody had to take years of training. We mobilized and take the year's training.

*When Pearl Harbor was bombed, what were your thoughts? I'm sure you were surprised, but do you remember that day, how you were told or how you found out about it?*

**Orby Ledbetter:** The reason why I stayed there, the war was, we was in the war, and I studied history and everything else, and everybody thought the Japanese would be whooped in six months, couldn't fight and everything else. But they had been fighting in China about 6-8 years and killed millions of China men, and they had to be a good warrior then. So all we did, we knew we had to fight the Germans, too, and Roosevelt, we were all in the dining room there when he made his speech and declared war on the Japanese, and we knew we was in a war. I signed up and I was in there 5 years in the regular Army.

*So you knew then at that point, because you'd already been in the National Guard since 1937 and you'd been activated for at least a year. So at that point you were a lot more trained and seasoned than the average draftee.*

**Orby Ledbetter:** Oh yeah, we was trained pretty good. I was a corporal at that time, on maneuvers in Louisiana and everything. The bad part about it, we had to work machine guns and mortars, went down a storm pipe, and we had the leggings on between rifles. I don't think we'd done any good fighting, but we thought we could.

*How long was it after war was declared before you were on your way into Europe into Britain?*

**Orby Ledbetter:** April 1<sup>st</sup>, 1943, we shipped out of New York, New York, and we landed in North Africa.

*In North Africa, OK.*

**Orby Ledbetter:** 36<sup>th</sup> Division was scattered everywhere. 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, 142<sup>nd</sup> Infantry was attached to the 5<sup>th</sup> Army Headquarters at Arguand, and 18<sup>th</sup> Platoon, my platoon taught the other troops street fighting. We were trainees. If they wanted the Arguand there, so I seen all the leaders of the United States Army, Japanese, the fleets and all that, all the leaders had to stand guard for them out in that old sun, 120 degrees.

*What were your thoughts, sir, when that ship left the United States and you knew you were going off to war?*

**Orby Ledbetter:** Our morale was pretty high. We thought we was the best soldiers there was in the world. Everybody wanted to go fight, kill a few Germans. They didn't tell us they was going to kill some of us, too. We enlisted that way.

*Where were most of the men in your unit from? Were they pretty much all Texans as well?*

**Orby Ledbetter:** All Texas, then we went to Camp Blaney, and we got to Camp Blaney, we got 68 Polish boys from the south side of Chicago. Then we got about 10 or 12 out of the other states, northern states. We had 68 Polish boys, and they made good soldiers and they made good friends, and in about 30 days they said they was from Texas. We Texas-ized them. We got along good with 'em.

*That's great. So tell us, sir, what it was like in Africa? Did you land in -*

**Orby Ledbetter:** I landed in Orzoo. We landed there at night. We were about 4 or 5 miles out of town out there in the shrubs and camped. We had tents. They built a town there, a street there to fight over, and we were there about 30 days and I took the mumps, went to the hospital there, and the airport, between the hospital and the shipping was a park about one block, and German planes come over and bombed it, and the four of us in a room, I got to, it was 10 to 10, just open the building was about 1,000 years old, and it knocked all four of us down, the blast did. About 4 or 5 foot from there there's a hole that's the hospital wall.

*You had to have felt a bit fortunate and lucky that you survived that.*

**Orby Ledbetter:** Yeah, one of the airplanes hit the mountain and burned up. The second night they come over there, they took us downstairs and I went downstairs and got outside in the palm trees, there's three big ones there, but they was about 60-70 foot high, and I got Life magazines there and moved that night. I could read 'em. As they're bombing, they searched for me because they were afraid I got killed or something. They searched for about an hour and I come back. I'd been reading them Life magazines.

*Where did you go after you got better?*

**Orby Ledbetter:** I went back to the unit there and we trained. We found out we were going to go somewhere, so we get on the ships, it was 2 o'clock in the morning, and trainees on that, and we got ready to go to Salerno Beachhead. I was in the first wave at Salerno Beachhead, Salerno there.

*Which is in Italy, right?*

**Orby Ledbetter:** It was 3 o'clock in the morning and they told us we'd be the first Germans we found would be 48 hours, and my platoon was supposed to go, the British Army, the American Army was 8 miles apart, and we were supposed to take my platoon over to meet the British 4 miles, and attack them and go over the mountains and meet the paratroopers. At that time the regular Army would be over there.

*How many men were in your platoon?*

**Orby Ledbetter:** 39.

*39 in your platoon. And at that point were you still a corporal?*

**Orby Ledbetter:** I was a sergeant then.

*So you were the platoon sergeant at that point?*

**Orby Ledbetter:** Yeah.

*Did you have a lieutenant as the platoon commander?*

**Orby Ledbetter:** Yeah, lieutenant commander.

*Tell us about the lieutenant. What are your memories of him?*

**Orby Ledbetter:** He was from Michigan, lieutenant was. Everybody liked him. He was a good one. Before we hit the beach 1,000 yards of beach, we come under artillery fire, 80-yard artillery fire, and the machine guns we got close enough to the beach, and it was hitting the front end of the boat, and I'm 6 foot tall over, had to stand up there and look for mines. I seen two mines out in the ocean of the boat that we was over to the left, and we come in to the beach there, and they quit firing on us because we was out of range. We hit the beach, raft went down. I was the first one off. I hear a crip bar, I set off 17 flares, the left, there was not a German down there, nothing, but right, there was Germans half tracks dug in with their machine gun man, and I looked up, the water cut my leg to the bone, around rubber boot, and I looked up and holes in the wire and I went through it, took the platoon through it. Then there was 4 or 5 of us doubled back and we threw grenades at the half track and all the machine guns, and in about 5 minutes we wiped them out, or less, about 2 or 3 minutes. We run down there and other troops come in there and they did the same thing, so we cleared the beach there in 15-20 minutes and we took off. The Germans, they were sleeping and we went through the beds, everything, and they pulled back and we went through to the highway. A halftrack come down there, old Colonel MacDally, well he jumped on the half track, put his pistol on there and they was all gone. We had a correspondent there from Life magazine, and I talked to him the night before.

*That's pretty ironic that you'd been reading Life Magazine just a little before that when you were in Africa, right?*

**Orby Ledbetter:** Yeah, I have a whole bunch of magazines, the 13<sup>th</sup> of August, they come out with the Salerno Beachhead, and this reporter there, he wanted to know where Mac was, and I told him he's probably over there, and he was there. Then we got the motorcycle guy in there, and so now we were told to go down and take the bridge. We went down to take the bridge, and the reporter, he went over across the fence there and he got shot, and we were not supposed to stop for anybody, you know. The medics would take care of him. And he stayed there, and I still got the papers on it, his story on it. We went on down to the bridge and the German tanks were running up and down the road, and they killed several people with their fire fighter. We pulled back in the brush, went down there, and about 100 yards from the bridge, one of the sergeants, he went down, and one of my men, and didn't come back. So me and a little Mexican boy, we went down there and looked over the bridge, and there were machine guns nested all around the bridge. They found out later, the sergeant there, they didn't know anything. They got

fired on so they went down the river and didn't come back. One of their men was shot pretty bad in his arm. And just 18 tanks, and double tracks, and a troop of a whole battalion of men, of Germans over there. I looked up there at the road was about 10 foot above where I was up there, out in the brush, looked up there and I seen the tanks, half tracks, all that. The trees all over the road, there were about 2 or 3-foot trees they overlapped and they hid in there. So I told that, I mentioned, I said can you crawl fish? So we crawled back to the lieutenant and I told the lieutenant about it, and I sent a runner back to find the artillery reserver, and looked up and the German tanks come down the road and covered us there, and the lieutenant, I had a grenade in my hand, fixin' to throw it at the machine gun nest I'd seen over there, past there. I thought I could hit it, the tank there, and the lieutenant jumped up and we surrendered. I looked up and two German soldiers, we were in an ammunition ditch about knee deep in water, men down there, and we thought it was our men, and they walked up to us, and the lieutenant said we surrender, and we went over the railroad bank there and down the bank. The German lieutenant, I was the first one, he asked me where Captain Coker was, all the officers, he knew every officer there was -

*And he spoke English really well?*

**Orby Ledbetter:** Yeah, he just questioned me. He said we ain't gonna find out nothin' about you, and I thought I was gone. He knew more about it than we do. They'd been waiting on us for 8 days. And when we hit the beach there, they knew exactly the foot where we was gonna come in. Then we went on up the highway and the Navy opened up the 6-inch shells on us, and knocked 8 tanks out there I found out later. We run by a block through the middle of them, tanks, halftracks, men, artillery, the 6-inch shells were hitting. All of us majors, we outrun him.

*When you were captured, how many men, how many American soldiers were with you when you were captured?*

**Orby Ledbetter:** I started with 30 there, and there were 10 of us left at that time.

*10 of you that were captured. So you and the lieutenant and 8 other soldiers.*

**Orby Ledbetter:** Yeah.

*What did you think when you were captured? I imagine it had to have been a terrifying moment.*

**Orby Ledbetter:** Well, I was mad because they had lied to us. We didn't have no intelligence, and men were getting killed. I was more mad there that I had that many men to take care of. I didn't have too much time to think about myself or anything else. Do you know, are you aware of the hound dog hunting?

*Yes sir.*

**Orby Ledbetter:** Well a hound dog will eat eggs, you whip him, and when he sticks his tail between his legs and head down, it's the saddest thing you ever seen in your life. That's me, I was sad. After we went on down to a building in the Roman days there, artillery started hitting it, and our lieutenant, he was shot through part of the leg, and we run down right about down there to the woods and the British, the 180<sup>th</sup> British was taking prisoners, and the 106<sup>th</sup>, well before dark there was 84 Americans taken prisoner.

*How did they secure you? Did they just have armed guards on you or did they handcuff you or tie you up?*

**Orby Ledbetter:** No, they didn't. They put a machine gun out there and they told us they had been at the Russian front, and if anybody escaped, they would kill 10 men. They made it through, and we stayed there, well we hadn't had no sleep in two nights, days you know, and so the next morning, the trucks come and picked us up. We got to ride in the trucks and the British, they rode the trailers, and we rode 5 days and nights on top of them mountains over there. All we had was grapes and water. Then at Naples, they loaded us up in a train near an air raid, boxcars, and it was just standing room only. I was against the back end of it, and had so many packed in there you couldn't turn around or nothin'. We was 5 days and nights, no water, no food or nothin', in that boxcar.

*What were your thoughts at that point?*

**Orby Ledbetter:** I wished I was home picking cotton.

*Sure.*

**Orby Ledbetter:** My friends getting killed on the beach, I thought about those guys I was raised with, everything. Rollin Andrews, he was the first man killed on that. I was raised with him. His sister and I, we run around the same crowd. And other people. The word was passed down that somebody bit the dust, and you didn't have time to worry about them. You just at night you thought about 'em a lot, but right then you were just trying to keep alive, find Germans to shoot.

*Once they began transporting you, how long was it before you were able to send some sort of Red Cross type note or something?*

**Orby Ledbetter:** We were on the train there 5 days and nights. Of course we pulled off the side there, troop trains come by, and we ended up in Germany up there, Munich, Germany, in that concentration camp. That's the first time we got anything to eat. They made us sit there and change uniforms. We got Serb uniforms during the battle of 1884 there, and had boots on, and the jacket I wore, and we stayed there 30 days while they took pictures and got a record out there, but most of us lied on the record. But they never did check us or nothing else. Then in 30 days we loaded up on up to \_\_\_\_ up there to 2B, and we had places to set down in that train. We went down through Yugoslavia, Romania, and all that, where they wouldn't bomb us, you know. The privates were all separated from sergeants and corporals, and they went to the potato fields out that way, and we had the 3B, \_\_\_\_ on the Oder, had a sergeant's camp on there, so we went to it, and I stayed there 14 months. They had Red Cross boxes, 5-6 pounds, they issue you one a week, but all they fed you was rutabaga soup in the morning and at night you got a slice of bread made out of sawdust and beet leaves, and then what we eat in the Red Cross boxes. The camp was brick buildings and they had two part of them, and in the middle of them they had a wash room in there. There was 250 men in the front and 250 men in the back. We had to fall out 7 o'clock in the morning, got roll call, and let 'em know you was doin' real good, you could do what you wanted to, and then 4 o'clock they counted you again. I walked 3 miles every day around, you could walk around the whole deal, in sand, deep sand. And the Red Cross, it was a show camp what it was. The Red Cross come in there and Germans, see how good we were.

*That makes sense because I've heard, I've interviewed a lot of POWs that told me they never received the Red Cross packages, and the Germans would tell them that their packages had been*

*bombed or they had not received them, and so it's interesting you mention you were kind of a show camp because you were getting all the things that a lot of the other prisoners weren't getting.*

**Orby Ledbetter:** The first 14 months we did, but the Russians pushed out of Poland, and they issued us one box, and we walked 10 days back to the other side of Berlin, \_\_\_\_\_. That was camp 3A, and we didn't have nothing, they didn't issue us nothing except what we carried, and we dug out in the fields there. The first two days we just walked, \_\_\_\_ they walked all night, all that day and all next night, next day, and then they put us in a barn there. The next morning they come out and they were pullin' us back up to our building deals. I was in 19A, and our group, we started off, they put about a ½ mile difference in there, and the \_\_\_\_ come by on a motorcycle and he told his guard anybody that fell out didn't \_\_\_\_ next days they're gonna shoot 'em. And a bunch of them fell out there. We get the packs moved just like we did in the days before. I hollered and told 'em they come back and just like one of 'em come back, he was about the foot of me, and they shot him, hit him in the temple and killed him, the guard did. The guards told us, the guards don't have any ammunition or nothing. They said you escape, the Russians get you and they shot you. So we stayed in. We got back to 3A and they put us in tents and everybody, all the prisoners come in and put us in tents there in these big circus tents. All we done had room on the floor on the ground there, and a blanket there were two men there. In the daytime you fold your blanket over where they walked through there. We had two water spouts, a 6-foot pipe sticking up, water running all the time, it froze, and you ended up about 25-foot high, but would have steps cut up there and you'd go up there and get you a drink where the water was warm. That's where all we had was one bowl of that soup and a hunk of bread, and two potatoes about as big as an egg. And they had the Norwegians and they had a general in charge of the camp there, but everybody was hungry. You couldn't sleep at night. You was that hungry you would doze off, and somebody would be talking about food, their grandma there. Now one thing in camp, you never talked about your wives. It was always your mother and your grandma, about what they cooked.

*Speaking of family, sir, when did your family learn that you had been taken prisoner?*

**Orby Ledbetter:** Well, about 30 days.

*And did they get a notice?*

**Orby Ledbetter:** Yeah, they got a notice I was missing in action, and about 30 days later they got word I was a prisoner of war. But the Abilene paper had in there I was killed in action, me and Bill Taylor was killed in action. It was a couple of weeks before it got out I was alive.

*So your family thought you had been killed.*

**Orby Ledbetter:** Yeah, it was in the Abilene paper. And Bill Taylor, he was a top sergeant, I was raised with him there, and he was the top sergeant. They said that they tied him onto a tank, and the tank was loaded up, but he was with me all the time. I don't know where they got that. That was the story. We stayed there and then the Russians come in, the Cossacks, you know what a Cossack was?

*Yes sir.*

**Orby Ledbetter:** Wild Russians on horses, with beards 6 inches long and everything. They come in the camp and the Germans, we had about 400 Germans already surrendered there, and they come in and opened the gate, and some of us, we got out and went out. My buddy, he went to, he brought a banner, a hen in there and other things. I went down to Luckenwaff, me and a Cherokee Indian, we went down there and we went in the hat factory to get us a hat. There wasn't a rabbit hat, but we couldn't find a hat. We heard a hattery was going up in the cellar. We got in the cellar and there was a big pile, don't know how long it was. Anyway, they had a room there and two Russians broke the safe open and everything they wanted to lift. I couldn't lift the dog-gone sledgehammer they had. I went in the next room and there was gallons of beans, potatoes there, beets, all the darn stuff you could find in gallon jugs, and I got a toe sack. I couldn't move 'em. I kept putting stuff out where I could drag it, and finally got the men and friends, and we drug it out, and we'd been going through, and along here come 4 or 5 guys hunting us. So we carried that back to camp and we had a go-od supper that night.

*Sir, to go back to your family learning about you becoming a POW, were you ever able to send them like a Red Cross type postcard or something like that that let them know where you were?*

**Orby Ledbetter:** We got two postcards and one letter a month. We was writing. They censored it, you know, but there was a whole lot of that mail never did get shipped out.

*Oh I'm sure, absolutely.*

**Orby Ledbetter:** Later on, they found a room over there with a whole lot of it stored up there. We found out the Germans had Red Cross boxes over there in a warehouse that they didn't give us.

*Now I know at one point sir, because I have the copies I was sent of pretty amazing copies of the journal that you kept. I guess it says on the front that it was from the American YMCA and it was published by the War Prisoners A of the YMCA out of Switzerland. I was wondering if you could tell us a little bit about how you got that log and what all you put in it.*

**Orby Ledbetter:** Well, they issued it out. When I got there, it was already issued, so I paid 5 times. I did not smoke, I did not drink coffee, so I ate better. Me and my buddy, we eat better, he didn't neither, so we lived better, but I paid 5 packs of cigarettes for a Red Cross book there, about 8 inches by 10 inches, and I filled it up. At that time, I draw cartoon deals, so I got a lot of cartoon things in there. My granddaughter got the book. She won't let me have it. But my grandson, he's going to St. Joe's Catholic school, and the teacher made him write a book, so he wrote a book on me.

*That's great.*

**Orby Ledbetter:** It's gonna be April before we get it. But she read the book. She said that was the best book she ever read and she wants one. But he did get stuff out of my log book, but most of them, we come out of it and the snow was about knee deep. We walked in knee deep snow and they throwed everything away. I saved some of them books, throwed away and everything, and I brought mine home. I got all the pages. Sometimes four or five of us would get together and we had some guys that would do anything in there, and they would make songs out and verses and everything, and one good buddy of mine, he had been in college three or four years, and what I wrote, well he corrected it.



*I think it's amazing, sir, because you have the poetry and some of the sketches, and then even one of the pages they copied and sent to me is about the number of barbs on the barbed wire fence.*

**Orby Ledbetter:** Oh, that's mine, I thought that up.

*255,496, you broke it down by the different lengths in wires and post. How long did it take you to count something like that?*

**Orby Ledbetter:** Well, I just estimated it. You had something to do over there and I thought it was funny.

*Sure, because I guess that kind of helped break the monotony.*

**Orby Ledbetter:** Oh yeah. A lot of other guys brought their book to me to make cartoons. We had one Polish, he was 90 years old, Polish guard with the Germans, you know, they would draft them, and he walked between the outside there, and he had a patch, a big patch over one knee, and he cussed the Germans every step, the Polish boy, that's what he talked about. They'd laugh about it, you know. They told him, them Germans gonna shoot you. And he missed three wires over there, and got him out. He said that's the best thing they can do, shoot me. I copied him, you know. I got a picture of my wife, so I drew my wife, and she recognized it, but I like to draw them cartoons, you know.

*Did the guards ever look at what you were putting in that book?*

**Orby Ledbetter:** Oh, he didn't care what you put in there.

*OK, because I was kind of surprised that they would even let you keep a journal for fear that you would –*

**Orby Ledbetter:** No, some of the guys took everything down. There was a lot of them books around. No, he stopped there and looked at the cartoons, laughed, and told me it was good.

*That was the prison warden or the guard?*

**Orby Ledbetter:** Well, that was Bettweevil, he was in charge of our barracks, on 500 men, and he was a policeman from Berlin. He was a retired police from Berlin, and he knew every man's first name out of the 500. He was nice, so he knew the \_\_\_\_\_. He was really nice, he went out of his way, you know, to be nice to us. If you didn't cause no trouble or didn't get caught with the postman in there – one time he was walking, there was four or five men walking by the front gate there, the swung gate where they take the gate loose, two parts of it, and the sergeant had the guard at the street out there raising Cain, a German gave orders and everything else. He screamed, and they pulled one side of the fence up and took it around by the barracks, and they didn't get anything, so went back and they got the other half on there, and then the guard, the sergeant seen that, and well he raised Cain. We had to go out there and stand 6 hours in formation. But we laughed, you know. They sent the guard and the sergeant to the Russian front, and word come down they didn't last three or four days. So we pulled through. There's always somebody smart enough to pull something on the Germans. They had to stand guard at night. See, we didn't have to stay, we slept. So we'd get out there and stand in formation, and

somebody dug down, and the Germans couldn't count, never could count, and they would count us by the hour there, and finally gave up.

*Was there ever any thought by any of your fellow prisoners about trying to escape?*

**Orby Ledbetter:** Well we had four or five escape. Three of them got back to England.

*How did they get away?*

**Orby Ledbetter:** What the deal was, we had about 200 French men in camp. They was over in the town every day and worked. Ones that escaped because they knew the families in France would be shot, see, so what they do, for a couple of cigarettes, pack of cigarettes, well we would trade places with them, and you'd go to town like that and they escaped. Some of the guys just went to town to get them a woman. But the guards, you'd buy bread, rabbits, stuff that way, white bread, for cigarettes and coffee. Their general told us once to come out there and got us all together and he said there's more coffee and cigarettes in Berlin than there was in the United States. Quit trading.

*Did you get much news from the outside world? Did you kind of know what was going on in the war?*

**Orby Ledbetter:** Every night at 10 o'clock, we heard, we had a radio in there. I don't know where it was or anything, but we had a radio in there and at 10 o'clock we'd get it. The next day, they'd come through the barracks and put those guards that was over, looked at the guards, and the Germans and everything else, and then read what the news was. We knew where everything, everybody was, everything. Then I took the Berlin paper once a week, I'd give a pack of cigarettes, and my job was four or five pages of the soldiers was killed, airmen, everything, it had a picture in there about 4x4, and my deal was to write down where they got killed at and everything else.

*This was a German language paper?*

**Orby Ledbetter:** It was a German paper. I know to read German. I couldn't speak it. I have trouble speaking English let alone.

*But you learned how to read German just in your time in prison -*

**Orby Ledbetter:** Well, I'd read it, knew what the words was and everything. That was part of my job. After I got home, I got two grandkids, and they speak perfect German. They laughed at my German. I quit talking to 'em.

*That's interesting. So then the morale must have been pretty high in your camp because you knew what was going on and I guess you had to have known that the Allies were going to win eventually.*

**Orby Ledbetter:** Oh yeah, we knew that. The Germans did, too. The Nazi's didn't know it. They were too propagandered. The German paper told the truth what it's doing. I mean you could read it and it would match, and we had prisoners coming in all the time, see, so when some come in, they had a committee and they went and told where everything was. So we knew exactly what was going on.

*Tell us about when you finally got liberated, or finally got out.*

**Orby Ledbetter:** The Russians come in there and stayed three or four days, in April there, and we'd get out daytime out of the fence, and then come back. They wanted to take us to Odessa. They were going to get \$5 for us. But they had slave labor with the Allies already cutting France and all back in there, see, and wouldn't come back. If one of them ever seen the toilet, he wouldn't come back. That's what they always said. The Ukraines, the Germans drafted them in the Army, and what the Russians did and they took prisoners there, and they let them, they joined the Army there, and 800 officers went in the Air Force was sent back to Russia and they all shot themselves. So they committed suicide if they was going back. Then the Russian prisoners we had with us at the camp, when they went back to Russia, they had to go to Siberia for 10 years in jail, and Joe \_\_\_\_\_ the major -

*That's right.*

**Orby Ledbetter:** And went and traded him for a German general. He said he didn't have a son, so he went and crawled the fence there and they killed him.

*Yeah, I remember reading about that.*

**Orby Ledbetter:** Now there was a camp by them, 3B, had more than, there was three or four wagons that was dead Russians died there and then froze, you know, in all shapes, and took the clothes off of them and take them down there and throw them in the lion pit. There was over 2,500 of them died that winter we was in. Now they talk about the tetanus shot, we had to have a tetanus shot, we'd all died, too. Lice, we had lice all the time, you kill them, everything. All of Europe was lousy.

*Wow, when the Russians got closer to your camp, did a lot of the Germans just flee? A lot of the German officers and soldiers flee for fear of being captured by the Russians?*

**Orby Ledbetter:** We had 400 Germans in the camp with the prisoners and the Russians took 'em there and they marched them back to Russia. We had about 8 or 10 men that some of them were friends of mine, they got caught on a road, and the Russians couldn't speak Polish or German or English, so they took him about 100 miles. Everybody had hair, see, the POWs, we saved our hairs were cut real short for lice, so I'd have found a Russian doctor who could talk English, and they told him about it, and he told him, said look at their hair. They are Americans. So they turned them around and went back. So we did meet a bunch of Russians. They keep a bunch of Air Corps people in that wave back there, and we had a few people never did show up.

*So when you were finally liberated, how long is it before you were able to start the process of getting back home to the United States?*

**Orby Ledbetter:** Well, I can talk and for a long time I didn't tell anybody about it, but the big \_\_\_\_\_ here, I saw him talking to the kids in school, always in Georgetown, Port Lavaca, and all these, all the schools here. Two years ago I talked to all the 4<sup>th</sup> graders in Victoria about it. I started the Crossroads Chapter of POWs here, and had 40 people in there at one time, and after I talked, I got the others talkin' and their wives said they changed, you know, found out what their husband done, and said that their husband even pick up different about it. So I believe in talking about it.

*Sure, absolutely. How long sir was it before you were able to get back home to Texas?*

**Orby Ledbetter:** Well, I was on a troop train, and it was June 19<sup>th</sup>.

*So about two months after you were released -*

**Orby Ledbetter:** I left France June the 2<sup>nd</sup> and got back here, we come back, and Lucky Stripes was when everybody all the POWs got in their tent there for Texas, at Fort Sam, and we had 164 in there. 90% of them were Air Corps people, and the captain there, he said I'm captain, he said \_\_\_ sergeants here, so two of us held our hand up and he pointed to that guy and said you're a captain and told me I was a lieutenant. He said Air Corps sergeants didn't know nothin'. We was organized, and we organized everything and he went over there every morning to see what ship we come out on, in one of them cement ships, and we put our bags down in the hole and we slept on the deck coming back. Took 10 days to come back.

*I'm sure that had to have been a good feeling though to know you were heading home.*

**Orby Ledbetter:** Oh yeah it was. They put us on trains, 1,800, the trains over there, and went to one town and the German train was a Pullman, sleeping Pullman passed us. Boy we got mad. We wanted to stop. They treated them Germans that way and treat us in the old coaches.

*Do you remember the day you got home to Texas?*

**Orby Ledbetter:** Yeah, well we left Brownwood and got to San Antonio.

*Do you remember the day you got to Texas?*

**Orby Ledbetter:** Yeah, I got there 5 o'clock in the morning, and 6 o'clock there was about 10 or 15 cars around there, and I went \_\_\_ who had kin folks all around, had the fried chicken and all that out under trees. I was just glad to get home.

*I'm sure everybody was glad to have you home, too.*

**Orby Ledbetter:** Yeah.

*Do you remember the reaction from your mom and your dad when they saw you again?*

**Orby Ledbetter:** My momma was dead. She died when I was 10 years old.

*Oh that's right, I'm sorry, I forgot about that.*

**Orby Ledbetter:** I had an aunt that I lived with, and she took my mother's place I guess. She had been waiting there. They didn't know when I was coming in or nothing else. So they was waiting over there, but I seen all my kin folks over there and I was glad. And we had the Red Cross lady there at Brackenridge, the doctors, all the POWs, everything else, and she come down and seen me and gave me a big hug and a kiss on the cheek.

*It sure had to have been an emotional reunion for everybody there.*

**Orby Ledbetter:** Oh it was, and there was two of us. Doug Sordinau, we was raised together and we come home together. Then all of the other boys, some of them were already coming there, and we went to a beer joint one Saturday night and everybody had supper and everything. A lot of them made it back and a lot of them didn't. Two years later, and every year since then, we've been having a reunion until 4 or 5 years ago there was 12 of us left. There's only 2 of us left now. He's 96 years old and I'm 90 years old.

*You've been able to stay in touch though.*

**Orby Ledbetter:** Oh yeah, he's in Brackenridge. He was my sergeant and then he joined, getting paid \$100 for an officer, so he made officer. Them days, sergeants, they correspond of course and go off 30 days to be an officer. So he joined the paratroopers and he was the only one, they formed the 82<sup>nd</sup> paratroopers, and he was the only one had any \_\_\_ on there and three months he ended up captain. He ended up as colonel. He was the colonel of the 141<sup>st</sup> in Korea. There are some boys here, radio operator lives out here below me, and he was a fighter. But he had more guts then. He was a soldier's soldier and always was.

*Sounds like it. Yes sir. And so after the war you settled into Victoria and it's been your home town since?*

**Orby Ledbetter:** No, my uncle was \_\_\_ boss with Continental Oil Company, and another \_\_\_ the lieutenant, he worked for my dad on a rig there one time. I went and talked to him, and he got me a job being a \_\_\_ in Texas. I worked there 7 years. I worked in a plant, compressor plant, got to work there at Yorktown, and then here 12 years at the pressure plant, and then they put computerized the plant down there, and I walked in every day on it, so they put one in Flatoria and they sent me up there as the head maintenance man. So I was up there 19 years. My kids in Yorktown married German kids, so they moved to Victoria. So I moved to Victoria on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1984. I built a house, always had a house built on the river over there, and it flooded out and I built a house, had it built and everything. I paid for it. The last day when I had it all paid for, so I've been living here since.

*I understand. And I understand, sir, you're still very active with the VFW and American Legion?*

**Orby Ledbetter:** Well I'm an officer in all of them, all the Vet Castle, all them. I \_\_\_ the 142<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division, 36<sup>th</sup> Division, 142<sup>nd</sup> Regiment. I'm the officer to all them, been the officer, and the \_\_\_ down here, I was a supply officer and I made coffee one whole week, made coffee in \_\_\_ pot one whole week. So I'm into everything.

*That's great, that is really great.*

**Orby Ledbetter:** I'm on television once a night.

*How is that?*

**Orby Ledbetter:** Advertise the rest home here, one of the rest homes. And I'm on the newspaper, the \_\_\_, and other, the last \_\_\_ I had to go to Mission Valley Tech school over there, they wanted me to talk. I made a speech over there and had a big article in the paper. I'm on television quite a bit. I'm the only POW real active around here.

*Must be, wow.*

**Orby Ledbetter:** There are two of us in town, they're not able to do anything, the two at house \_\_\_ left on that. So I'm active. I just come back from taking supplies. I'm the supply sergeant to the clinic here. I take the supplies down there.

*Well that's great sir. You're so involved.*

**Orby Ledbetter:** Everybody thinks I'm about 70 years old.

*Well that's excellent.*

**Orby Ledbetter:** I got all my grandkids, great grandkids we have here except one of them. She lives in Memphis. She got three Masters degrees. She works at a shipping company, and her office is four doors from the president, so she's making it, but I got all my grandkids are smarter and I don't know how come. One of them just graduated in Texas there, and he got 97-1/2.

*That's great. I'm sure they're all proud of your service.*

**Orby Ledbetter:** Oh yeah, they think I'm it. I've got 'em fooled.

*Well I think they're probably right, and we're gonna send you some copies of this interview so you can give some of these interviews to them if you'd like, and if you want more copies let me know and I can print more for you.*

**Orby Ledbetter:** I got two copy machines.

*Well no, but these are CD's. These are going to be audio CD's so we can burn them for you off of our computers.*

**Orby Ledbetter:** Well, I'm gonna tell you they're advertisin' Ron Paul. I don't know where, my granddaughter's got it, haven't seen it yet and they was talkin' about it last night, the four of us, Ron Paul's there. You might be able to get it, it's on the TV.

*OK, well I'll have to look for that.*

**Orby Ledbetter:** They were talking last night about some side deals there, \_\_\_ my pictures over there, but Ron Paul we're for him. He sure helped us out.

*Well good. Well sir, I tell you, we really appreciate you taking the time to talk to us today.*

**Orby Ledbetter:** If I can get your address, I can send you a copy of these other two.

*Oh absolutely, and what I want to do sir is in about a week when we get these interviews made on CD, we're going to mail those to you and I'll be sure to put my card in there with all my contact info.*

**Orby Ledbetter:** OK, would you like to have that, last 90 days all them -

*Yes sir, we'd love to make a copy of it.*

**Orby Ledbetter:** Well I'll send you a copy of it.

*Yes sir, that would be great. I'd love to see that.*

**Orby Ledbetter:** It's the battle there, first 10 days, you know. It's there, and it's got one sailor on the coast there, where the hospital ship got hit, his \_\_\_\_ sent a bomb over and they \_\_\_\_ loose the airplane, a bomb hit and flew over there and hit the hospital. 22 nurses was killed on it.

*I'd love to see that issue. I've seen a lot of old issues of Life, and I know it was a really good magazine.*

**Orby Ledbetter:** Well I'll send you that and you send me the address and some other stuff here.

*And sir, I think I mentioned to you before –*

**Orby Ledbetter:** I have a copy of other prisoners of war history. Would you like to have that, too?

*Yes sir, anything you want to send us, we'll be glad to take any copies.*

**Orby Ledbetter:** I have the books that they wrote, too. You think there's a place there?

*Well we don't have an archive really for books. What we can do is make copies of any photographs or articles that you send us and add those to your section.*

**Orby Ledbetter:** These are regular little pamphlet books, you know, 4x6 or 6x8.

*Oh yes, I'd love to see those, sir.*

**Orby Ledbetter:** It was about he was a prisoner of war in China, and it's so cold up there they built a big machine shop and it's so cold up there the Chinese wouldn't look in there. They would look in there, take 'em up there and put 'em in there, and they had a big, they brought a big engine up there and make a big engine there, and they dug a hole down there and they buried that engine and put cement over it. The Chinese never could find it.

*Interesting.*

**Orby Ledbetter:** The prisoners, they just thought of everything. They was always somebody honored would do.

*I'm sure you have to be kind of resourceful in those situations.*

**Orby Ledbetter:** I'll send that stuff to you.

*Yes sir. Well sir again it's been an extreme honor for me to be able to interview you today and I wanted to thank you. I know everybody here at the Land Office from Commissioner Jerry Patterson on down wants to thank you for your service for our nation, and that's what this program is about, is to thank you for your service and also to save your interview so future generations can hear it.*

**Orby Ledbetter:** I had one halftrack, I throwed a grenade in a halftrack and three machine guns. It was 3:30 in the morning and I don't know what happened, where I was running too fast, but they stopped firing. So I got a credit for them.

*Yes sir. Well sir again, thank you very much. It's been an honor to be able to interview you and be looking for the package from us in the mail in about a week or so.*

**Orby Ledbetter:** OK.

*All right sir, thank you.*

**Orby Ledbetter:** Oh yeah, our kin the Crabtree's, had a great grandma named Crabtree.

*Really, where was she from?*

**Orby Ledbetter:** Illinois.

*Where is that? Oh in Illinois, OK.*

**Orby Ledbetter:** My mother's people come from Illinois, in 1850.

*Well it's probably a distant relative of some sort. There's not a whole lot of Crabtree's out there.*

**Orby Ledbetter:** I know -

*There's usually a few in every town, but it's a pretty rare name so that when people hear it, they tend to remember it.*

**Orby Ledbetter:** Well Ledbetter is all over Georgia and Florida, and everywhere else a lot of them. Brackenridge had 3. I'm a fourth \_\_\_\_ Ledbetter. They got there in 1824, and had salt mines in \_\_\_\_, Texas. Then they had a Caddow Ledbetter, they just had a plain Ledbetter. That's where they ask you where you's kin. OK, it was nice talking to you.

*Yes sir, thank you again and we'll talk to you again soon. All right sir, take care, bye bye.*



*[End of recording]*