RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH NORMAN TOWAR BOGGS II

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES OF WORLD WAR II

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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TRANSCRIPT BY

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This begins an interview with Norman Towar Boggs II, in Princeton, New Jersey, on December 12, 2003, with Shaun Illingworth and Matthew Ramsay.

Norman Towar Boggs, II: … Mrs. Roosevelt had a certain amount of interest in [the National Youth Administration]. It was in Woodstock, New York, which … you probably have heard of. We were all Woodstockians; my family had a place in Woodstock. I was actually brought up in France. We lived in France for [years]. I spoke French fluently.

Shaun Illingworth: How did your family wind up in France?

NB: Well, my father, who lived in France, he had the ability to do that. Actually, I got involved with the Red Cross because … the staff of NYA were migrating to [the] Red Cross and I went to Washington and I was hired. See, it was a strange experience to me, in a sense, because it was a … new thing. I had been really involved in the National Youth Administration, which was also a new thing, so new that most of the staff didn't really know too much [about] what they were doing, but it involved me with the type of young men who were being drafted, and so, … I suppose it was a natural thing for me to migrate that way. I went to Washington, DC, for training, and then, was impressed, really, by the fact that we were spoken to, and at, by a lot of ladies with big hats. [laughter] That's the kind of women who were involved with [the] Red Cross in those days. I went to Fort Monmouth … as a trainee. Now, … I knew nothing about the Army at all. I knew nothing about the Army, to the extent that I had never even heard of "retreat," so that I was driving the car on the post, and so, suddenly, retreat sounded and everybody got out of their cars, saluted the distance, which was … [the proper] thing to do. I say this because I became, what happened, briefly, was, after the war, I was one of the people selected for Red Cross permanent staff, and I then retired from the Red Cross in 1975 and stayed on with the blood bank in New Brunswick until I was in my eighties. So, … [to] go on from there, the old-timers that there were in the Red Cross belonged to a different world. They were not the same as those of us who were part of the "new world," because the world did change tremendously after World War II.

SI: The people that were the old-timers …

NB: The old timers had been around a long time and the Red Cross was a very (trifled?) sort of agency in many ways, and, with the National Youth Administration, we were really trying to pioneer new things, and the kids that we had, not kids, young men, were from many Polish, Italian families. I'm speaking a little bit funny because I had the stroke. … The first thing that happened was that we got dumped into the Army, … knowing nothing about the Army, and then, as I say, we hadn't even heard of retreat, and I learned to like the Army, and I lived with them for fifteen years, so, I got to know the Army pretty well. As I said, I first went to Fort Monmouth. We hung around the office, watched things happen. As a matter-of-fact, I don't think that they had a very clear-cut criterion of what training for that staff was. As a matter-of-fact, I was later brought back from overseas and … [assigned to] training supervisors up at Camp Shanks, and I didn't run my business the way they did it at Fort Monmouth. We were just dumped into this, really, and what they were doing was handling the problems of men who had families and who either needed to go home or somehow solve their problems, and we made loans for guys to go home, and I'm trying to think of a case I had. … There was a procedure, which we got to know,

and they did a lot of work, in those days, by telegraph. There were chapters everywhere in the United States. Some of them were the weak chapters, some of them were extra strong, and they could help you get the information, which you then presented to the Army, and they gave the man leave. Later on in life, I really knew that I could get a man home if I believed in his problem, but I had to be careful and use good judgment in doing this. At this point, we lived in barracks, but I soon lived off the post. My family came and lived near me, but I was only there at Fort Monmouth a short time before I was transferred to Bangor, Maine. Bangor, Maine, in those days, it was pretty far. That was an airbase where the planes went and they put bombsights on them. The bombsight [base] … was a very secret organization and … the planes were flown prior to going overseas and fitted with bombsights. I knew nothing about this, what they did. I then began to handle cases … and began to have an understanding of what I was doing. I think you … get the idea that the Army (was uncertain, too?). … I got to know the [officers]; you know, the officers, they were new officers, by and large. We didn't have a big Army prior to World War II and the Army is a world unto itself.

[TAPE PAUSED]

To go back to Fort Monmouth, that's the Signal Corps outfit, as you know, and, in those days, they were training men to be [Signal Corps personnel]. What really [was] happening was, it was very interesting, these people were sergeants and old time sergeants; they didn't make it. They were … part of the old Army and they didn't have the education, in many cases, to make it. … I observed this. As I say, I was then transferred to Bangor, Maine. Now, Bangor, Maine, was a new base built, it was called Dow Air Force Base, and, there, I had an office and I was the field director, suddenly. … Air Force troops were already different, even though this was no separate Air Force base. … It was called the Army Air Force in those days and the Air Force already had a spirit of its own, really. I didn't realize that, because it was too soon, but they did. We also had some black troops and they were hewing the wood, drawing the water, as it were. They had white officers. The CO was an interesting man. He was Jewish and he cared about these men. … For example, I used the word, "Nigger in the woodpile." He said, "We don't say that around here." I had many experiences in … the future with black troops and, in fact, the Army realized that segregated units were not good units. The run of the mill problems … of the men were family problems. … In many an Italian family, … [the] mother got sick, wanted the guy to go home, and we had to verify the facts. … You get a doctor's recommendation. We made loans to those guys to go home. … Because these were [like the] many young men I had met in the NYA, … their problems were not new to me. I was there, and then, I realized, after a while, that … the interesting future in this service was overseas. So, I put in for overseas service and I went to Camp Edwards, which was in Cape Cod. Now, that was an old National Guard post which had grown tremendously. The work there was unbelievable in intensity and we could … stay in the office all day and all night, because we were so busy. … They had had there, for example, the 92nd Division, which was a unit, I believe, from Texas, National Guard unit. … I was supposedly assigned to them, but, then, somebody else … got assigned to them. He was not in charge and I was not in charge, and I said, … "I don't want this unit. I don't want to be … in the office for a future assignment." I began to have a feel for the Army. They had a post … which is called [the] East Coast Processing Center, for men who had gone AWL [absent without leave or AWOL] before going overseas. … They sent the guys there and I also found a new thing, women Army officers. … This unit, [the person who] … was in charge [was] a Lieutenant

(Benfeld?) and Lieutenant Benfeld, … she later became a colonel, as far as I know, and she was tough. If the guy didn't come in and salute properly, [laughter] she made him go back, but she ran … a good unit, and I used to interview some of the people in the stockade, and they had multiple problems. … I think if you want to know more about this, you should [read the] two-volume study which was made by Columbia University, actually, when Eisenhower was president there, and it's a very interesting study to read, because it shows you the kind of problem which guys did have, and the mothers were involved very deeply. There was a book written, I think [it was] called *Their Mother's Son*, in which the word "momism" was used. I had one man, I was stationed in Bangor several times, I may repeat myself, I had a man, who was a sergeant, whose mother would faint on the railroad station every time he came home, and this guy … had a problem. … His mother fainted in this railroad station; he'd never take the train. Anyway, he was eventually in trouble. This was an interesting case, because … he was from Augusta, Maine, and, as you probably don't know, there was a senator there by the name of Margaret Chase Smith, who was also in the Armed Forces Committee in Congress, … and I wrote to a letter to Margaret Chase Smith about this problem, because the man, what could he do? and, I don't know, … he got out. … He straightened up; whether … he got his mother straightened out is entirely different. I had another case up there where we had a black man and this man was married to a German girl and, as soon as he was transferred away, the white guys started coming around, and what would he do? He went … AWL. The man had a terrible problem, because this girl had only married him to get to the United States, and he had a terrible problem. I also had a strange case, when I was in New Jersey, which was similar. … We had a … Native American Indian, … when I was with NYA, we had Indians from the Upstate tribes, and his [name] was … Laughing Boy, I think his name was, I don't know; his name was Jumping Elk. … Jumping Elk was from the Far West, in an Indian tribe, and he went, one day, downtown … wearing his brother's jacket, and in his brother's jacket were Army orders to report to Camp Kilmer it was, and Jumping Elk was picked up by the MPs and brought to Camp Kilmer under guard, [laughter] whereupon they recognized that they'd already sent the brother overseas. So, Jumping Elk was then released to the community with no money and no luggage. He ended up in the police station and we had to get Jumping Elk home to his family, but it was a strange case. … We saw the confusion, … but I was used to the confusion, because the NYA was already confused. That was a new agency and they had new problems. … Finally, prior to overseas shipment, I went to Camp Edwards. … [At] Camp Edwards, … they were training antiaircraft units and I was supposed to be transferred to an amphibious unit which already had a Red Cross director. So, then, … I stayed around for a while. Eventually, I got orders and I embarked on a very strange trip. I went, first, to Washington and I got an assignment to a unit in Indio, California, and you know where Indio is? It's in the middle of the desert. … It's near Palm Springs.

SI: Okay.

NB: The train went as far as Palm Springs; after that, I had to [make my own way]. So, I took a train to Palm Springs and, in those days, the trains went all over the map. I went down through the upper states, beyond Texas, and … I was on a train for several days, and I arrived at Palm Springs, and then, I was taken to Blythe, Arizona, where they had an airbase, and, there, they told me, "No, you're not supposed to go to Blythe Air Force Base. There's already somebody there. Nobody's being assigned there." So, then, they say, "You go back to Salt Lake City and

they will reassign you." So, I went to Salt Lake City and they said, "Oh, a new man." They were so busy, these people, they were making loans so fast that stuff was piled in a heap. They didn't know what they were doing and it's impossible to know. So, the whole idea of loans was, in my opinion, not a good idea. … They should have made them grants. They had plenty of money to do it, but, see, the reason they didn't do it was that, in the British Army, if you went to a British club, they charged for coffee and doughnuts. Therefore, we were told, in England, "You have to charge, too." The Red Cross didn't think it was … a good idea. We got a very bad name because of it, but that's the way it was, but, anyway, I got to Salt Lake City and hung around there, helping out, and it wasn't, oh, a couple weeks before I got orders to go to Wendover, Utah. Now, Wendover, Utah, is the land that God forgot. It's up in the desert and I walked into the headquarters there and they said, "Who are you?" I said, "I have orders and I'm supposed to be assigned to the 461st Bomb Group." … They said, "Well, we've never heard of you before." "Well," I said, "here are the orders from your headquarters in Salt Lake City." So, they said, "Well, we've got to find you a place to live." So, I got a place to live in a big tent, which was two bunks high, and … that's where I ended up. … [The bomb group] was preparing to go overseas. … Their planes had not caught up with them yet. They were just a bomb group in the making and they were changing their CO. … Apparently, the man who had been in charge had not been adequate and they brought in a colonel by the name of [Frederic] Glantzberg. Well, I got to [know] Colonel Glantzberg pretty well. He was an old Army [man]. He was of the Patton type. … He was a good CO. I admired him. He had no fear and he, apparently, got the group straightened out. … Then, they were transferred to Fresno, California. … Within a few weeks, I was on my way to Fresno, by train, [laughter] and we went through the mountains and over to … Sacramento, and then, we went down to Fresno. There, that was a strange place; Fresno is a strange place. They have a peculiar fog which settles on the ground, but, [if] you go upstairs, then, you see the stars, and then, you see nothing below you. It's very strange and they couldn't fly planes very well out of there. So, the air echelon was, again, separated. They went to fly their planes somewhere else. They had B-24s. That was a new plane in those days and, … by that time, I had become acclimated to realize that the Army was how they were, and I would say that if you worked with the Army, you have to believe in their mission. You can't work with the Army [unless you accept that] and we had some people during the war who felt that … the Army was the enemy. … You were there to help men cope with the problems of the Army and, unless you believed in their mission, you couldn't help them. You can't help people whose lifestyle you don't believe in. … It's just not possible and I realized that, having worked with the young men who came out of the lower echelons of society, sometimes, that they had some problems. These were legitimate problems that had to be solved and they came, many of them, from cultures which were alien … to the United States in a way. They were Italian, they were Polish. In those days, they were very (foreign?); their families hardly spoke English. … I had learned to handle these things. I was in Fresno for, I guess, a couple of months, but not much more, and, suddenly, we got orders to go overseas. Now, we went overseas in a … very circuitous way. We were going to Norfolk, Virginia, but the train we took went way up through the upper states of North Dakota, South Dakota, and then, down to Norfolk, and we were on the train for a week, just traveling around and stopping and a lot of things. … We had a Captain Mitton, for example, who was … a National Guard officer, and they had PT, [physical training], which, as a matter-of-fact, was good, because, … you're sitting in this train, with no place even to sit together to eat, and I became friendly with the chaplain who was a Lutheran chaplain. He was my friend, really, for the rest of my time with the bomb group and he was the kind of a man

who was a family man. Now, I had lived in the country and outdoor hardship, to me, was not a problem, but he had lived with his wife and his family of two children. … As we got overseas, this was … difficult for him. … I realized that there were good chaplains and bad chaplains and … the good ones, I can say right now, were the Catholic chaplains, because the Catholic priest … lives in an environment of men and … they didn't have families and, say what you will, the Army is an environment of men, and I found Catholic chaplains to be more effective. That was my experience, even though other denominations were … okay. So, anyway, here we go to Norfolk, Virginia, by train. It was terribly cold there, bitter cold, and we got on board a Liberty ship. Do you know what a Liberty ship is? ...

SI: A Kaiser ship.

NB: Kaiser ship, yes, and we were in the front hold, and then, they had cargo in the rest of the ship, and, when we got out to sea, there were, as far as you could see, ships and they had escorts, which were little torpedo boats, which, in those days, were British. … We were on the ship and there for, as I say, four or five weeks before we finally landed anywhere, and I busied myself with … other things, because I realized that I was a civilian. I was somebody which the Army was carrying around, sometimes unwillingly, sometimes willingly, and I had to make my own way, which I did. … The ship was strange. They had Merchant Marine crews, they had an Army contingent which worked our antiaircraft guns, and then, they … were under the control of the Navy, but the captain of the ship … was with the Merchant Marine. … I made a deal with the Navy to go upstairs and listen to their radio, and then, I would publish a daily bulletin, and that was about the time of the Anzio invasion. … By that time, I had … built myself a portable office. I had my typewriter, so [that] I had it, and I could make this daily bulletin. That's really what I did, because I had no cases there. We hung around the Port of Bizerte for almost a week, actually, and then, [in the] late evening, strung out were these four ships of escorted [vessels], four or five ships. It was kind of a rough day, actually. We took off for Naples, from Bizerte. …

[TAPE PAUSED]

Where was I?

SI: In Bizerte, on the ship.

NB: Oh, one other thing, I have a vivid memory of this, was, … we had the chaplain, of course, and … there was a little room … off of this area [where] … the enlisted men ate out of mess kits. Now, the officers' area had a table, which was a little bit longer than that sofa, where … you ate, you could sit down to eat, and the chaplain held some of the meetings there. He would hold a Jewish meeting, and then, he would preach with his hat on, and then, he had a Protestant service, and then, he had a Catholic officer; … apparently, there was a Catholic service which could be handled by a layman. … I remember one where the chaplain stood on the upper deck in this ship and [was] looking down on the guys that were there. It was kind of an interesting sight, because there was the clouds and the rough sea and all ships as far as you could see, and he preached the sermon that way. … All these things were new; … here I was, now, a year later from when I joined, involved in the new world, which was the Armed Forces. … We got to Naples and the

Port of Naples had been pretty well bombed and there were sunken ships in there. We landed on the second ship. …

[Editor's Note: At this point, Mrs. Boggs returned home and the interview broke for lunch. During that time, a medical emergency occurred that prevented Mr. Boggs from continuing the interview.]

----------END OF INTERVIEW----------

Reviewed by Shaun Illingworth 6/16/04
Reviewed by Sandra Stewart Holyoak 6/17/04
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