

Interview with **Howard Becker**

Date: June 6, 1989

Interviewer: Sheila Bernard

Camera Rolls: 2140-2142

Sound Rolls: 266

Team: C

Interview gathered as part of *Eyes on the Prize II: America at the Racial Crossroads, 1965-mid 1980s*. Produced by Blackside, Inc. Housed at the Washington University Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection.

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Note: These transcripts contain material that did not appear in the final program. Only text appearing in *bold italics* was used in the final version of *Eyes on the Prize II*.

[camera roll #2140]

[sound roll #266]

00:00:12:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Marker.

[slate]

00:00:14:00

Interviewer:

Could you set the scene for me as you're driving towards Detroit? You had told me about the convoy and what you saw. Can you tell me who you're driving with and what you see?

00:00:24:00

Howard Becker:

Well, first of all I was leaving Camp Grayling. This was part of our middle weekend during an annual training period and I was leadin' my convoy to Detroit, and we had stopped for a refueling just outside of Detroit, and approximately twenty miles away, and we could see the whole city of Detroit literally in smoke. And my driver and, and my first sergeant were in

the vehicle with me and we was talking to one another about this situation and our radio, of course, was going and we were being briefed up on the situation as it was developing in downtown Detroit. And of course, at that time, we didn't have a specific mission. Our, our assignment was to report to this artillery armory on Eight Mile Road. And so we stopped for refueling and at that point we, we issued ammunition, we gave a basic briefing to our troops and prepared them for, for basically the normal combat missions. And then from that point we proceeded on to the artillery armory.

00:01:48:00

Interviewer:

OK, cut. That was nice. I wanna ask you to do it again.

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark.

00:01:53:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Marker.

[slate]

00:01:54:00

Interviewer:

OK, so as you're approaching Detroit what's happening?

00:01:57:00

Howard Becker:

Yes, as we approached Detroit—

Interviewer:

If you could just start again without the "yes." Just, "as we approached."

00:02:04:00

Howard Becker:

As we approached Detroit, we pulled off to the side to refuel our vehicles, and it was at that point that we could see the smoke rising up from downtown Detroit. And we then issued ammunition to our soldiers, and we also did a complete briefing to each soldier to prepare them for whatever we might anticipate could occur in the future, and to give them the self-protection that they needed. And then we proceeded on to Detroit.

00:02:43:00

Interviewer:

At that point what kind of things were you anticipating?

00:02:46:00

Howard Becker:

We basically anticipated that we may come upon crowds of people, perhaps even roadblocks that we may have to physically move or remove. We anticipated the possibilities of establishing wedges with our troops, to go forward to move crowds out of the area. But basically we were prepared to defend ourselves, but at the same time use as little [pause] action against the crowds as, as we would have to.

00:03:28:00

Interviewer:

OK, cut.

[cut]

[wild sound]

Interviewer:

Can you, you had told me about being in the middle of it and just, it's a great story—

[cut]

00:03:34:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Marker.

[slate]

00:03:36:00

Interviewer:

So, if you could tell me about what was happening on Grand and Michigan.

00:03:39:00

Howard Becker:

OK. Downtown Detroit on Grand and Michigan Avenue we were on a mission with the fire department primarily, who was trying to put out a bank fire. And it was at that point, when we were protecting the firemen putting out the fire, that the surrounding area was surrounded with some vacant buildings and the likes, and from the top of one building nearby we got a sniper firing at the, the firemen. Well, the firemen were ordered then to evacuate, and in doing so they didn't even have time to disconnect their hoses. They took off, and that left hoses laying in the streets, and when they'd come to the end of the hoses, they of course snapped and you had water hoses all over the streets like snakes, the water flying around. Our troops stayed in surrounding areas and under cover, and they finally did get the water hoses shut off and the, or the hydrants shut off, and, and the police officers in the area did assist in getting everything secured, and finally the fire department could return.

00:04:57:00

Interviewer:

You had different reactions from people in the community. Can you tell me about that?

00:05:00:00

Howard Becker:

There were a number of people in the community who were very supportive of us, mainly because they had spent a lifetime building their, their roots right here in the downtown Detroit area, and consequently they didn't want their homes or their businesses burned down. So they were quick to react to us and tell us where the, the perpetrators were and the people who were causing the problems, and they were very helpful and I think that attributed a lot to relieving us of, of our feelings toward the local community.

00:05:38:00

Interviewer:

OK, stop.

[cut]

[camera roll #2141]

00:05:39:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Marker.

[slate]

00:05:41:00

Interviewer:

So, if you could tell me again what it was like trying to protect firefighters in the midst of this.

00:05:47:00

Howard Becker:

The firefighters in downtown Detroit trying to put out fires consistently, we—was receiving sniper fire from various buildings, or from down the street, not always knowing where the, the firing was coming from unless you happened to see the flash. So, we would employ our troops to take cover behind vehicles, around, behind trees, alongside of, of buildings to, to protect them, first of all, and then for them to be on the watch for snipers. But the urgency is always there when, when someone fires at you, you naturally, the first thing is to take cover, and then to look and see where the, the firing came from. And of course, when the fire department was ordered to evacuate the area, the police officers and the, the Guardsmen stayed fixed in place and still had a mission to relieve the situation by, one, containing the, the sniper in his place and to try to get rid of that sniper one way or the other, to allow the fire department the safety and security to come back and fight the fire.

00:07:08:00

Interviewer:

What role did tanks play in Detroit? How were they used?

Howard Becker:

Pardon me?

Interviewer:

What would a tank do in term—how could you use a tank against a sniper?

00:07:15:00

Howard Becker:

Well, the tanks provided a lot of security for the, the Guardsmen because it's a heavy armor and, of course, nothing that was being fired at them could penetrate the, the tank. And so they could button up the tank and drive down the road and not worry about a sniper shootin' at 'em. However, it did show a lot of force and that consequently would, could pull into an area and if somebody did fire on that tank, that also gave us an indication of where the snipers were located. And once locating a sniper, it was pretty easy to, to hustle them outta the buildings. The police and the, and the Guardsmen alike would go in and, and remove the sniper.

00:07:58:00

Interviewer:

OK, stop.

[cut]

[wild sound]

Interviewer:

It's, it's clear why a community would be scared in the midst, in the midst of burning, their homes are at risk and there's a lot of shooting that they don't know where it's coming from. It has to be clear also why the law enforcement people would be scared. You're humans too, right.

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Hit it.

00:08:16:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Marker.

[slate]

Howard Becker:

OK.

00:08:19:00

Interviewer:

So, tell us what happened.

00:08:21:00

Howard Becker:

We were operating a roadblock in downtown Detroit, it covered a wide, a wide four-lane road but no divider in the center, and so it took a good sized roadblock to cover all four lanes. Just behind that was a primary fire station that housed a lot of firefighting equipment. So, the purpose intended here was to protect the firefighters and their equipment while they were getting it ready to go out and fight more large building fires. And as the roadblock was established, I was near the fire station when I heard 'em holler that there was, the roadblock was being run and witnessed a large Buick four-door go through the road block, take one side of the, of the intersection, and they fired on our road guards and consequently the order was given to return fire, and they did return fire, the vehicle rolled over at the next, at, at a road intersection. And the troops went down to, to get the people who were inside the vehicle. By the time they got there they had already evacuated the vehicle and ran away, so they saw 'em running away but there was no intent to shoot them per se, at the time.

00:09:58:00

Interviewer:

How did it feel to be at times the enemy in your own country?

Howard Becker:

Scary, because—

Interviewer:

Can you say it in a full sentence, though?

00:10:06:00

Howard Becker:

OK. The, the, here we are in, in our city, in our own state, and there was a war goin' on in Vietnam at the time, and we're being fired upon by our, our own citizens right here in our own country. So it was, it was quite scary. And not knowing exactly who the enemy was at that time gave rise to a lot of considerations and concerns for me as commander and, and my troops at the time.

00:10:39:00

Interviewer:

OK, stop.

[cut]

[wild sound]

Interviewer:

Was there, when we had talked on the phone you talked about some of the—

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark.

00:10:46:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Marker.

[slate]

00:10:48:00

Interviewer:

On the third day?

00:10:49:00

Howard Becker:

Yeah, about the third day of the, of the emergency in Detroit, we discovered that some of our police officers, and this is a isolated incident, had loaded their own weapons, had their own special side arms and their own special shotguns, and we heard discussion, informally, and it was reported to me and on to our intelligence people that they were strictly on a nigger hunt. And that gave rise to a lot of consideration on our part because we had a responsibility here to see to it that all of the citizenry was protected. So in first being notified of that and then further, seeing firsthand the situation, we reported it, we followed through on it and made sure that those police officers were handed over to their command and control and they were removed from the operations.

00:11:57:00

Interviewer:

OK, cut. I need you to do [unintelligible].

[cut]

[wild sound]

Interviewer:

If you could just tell me again about this, beginning from the beginning.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Take seven.

00:12:06:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark.

00:12:07:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Marker.

[slate]

00:12:09:00

Howard Becker:

The Detroit Police command group would assign various officers, police officers to our Guard patrol. And, or vice versa, it would be a Guard patrol with two or, or three police squad cars. A squad car may have two police officers in it, sometimes it had four police officers in it. And on one separate occasion two sergeants came in with their own separate loaded weapons, their own in—individual weapons that were separate from Detroit Police issue weapons, and consequently we had the feeling that they were not out to do what the normal mission, or what we were there to, to perform, and that was to protect the, the citizenry. And they indicated that they were out to, to get all they could get at the scene. So, consequently, finding out that they were police officers that were going to do less than what police officers are expected to do, we took action to turn them over to their command and remove them from the operations.

00:13:34:00

Interviewer:

OK, cut. Is there a point when you—

[cut]

00:13:39:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Marker.

[slate]

00:13:39:00

Interviewer:

Because it was such a public finding and you had, you know, that's a commission in Washington. Do you remember how you felt when the Kerner report came out?

00:13:49:00

Howard Becker:

Well, when the initial report was published on, on the Detroit situation, many of us were quite embittered, mainly because of the coverage that we got during the, the Detroit emergency. We didn't consider it to be a overriding riot per se. We, we saw isolated incidents, we saw a lot of fire bombing. There were some isolated incidents of snipers, but as far as massive, with the exception of groups and groups of people getting together, we didn't see any rioting per se. And as far as the pilfering or the, the looting that went on, we felt

like that was just basically a natural reaction for people. The building was burnin' down anyway so they might just well as confiscate and s—and take what they could.

00:14:53:00

Interviewer:

But having put your life in, in some ways on the line in Detroit, how did you feel about the criticism?

00:14:59:00

Howard Becker:

Well, we, we'd been criticized so badly by that point, by the various papers, that it just was, we just shunned it off.

00:15:13:00

Interviewer:

OK, stop.

[cut]

00:15:15:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Marker.

[slate]

00:15:16:00

Interviewer:

So, it's nighttime and you're on 12th Street. What's happening?

00:15:19:00

Howard Becker:

Well, the nighttime on 12th Street was probably the most unnerving, at least the first two or three nights, and that is that you had to swerve in and out of burning cars and, and debris that was laying into, in the roadway. There were no other vehicles on the road other than the,

the police or the military. However, those first couple of nights you never knew when somebody might throw a, a fire bomb at you or somebody shoot at ya', so there was a lot of precautionary measures taken to prevent the possibilities of, of being shot at. The other thing is, we tried to work our way past the burning buildings, allowing ourselves plenty of space, and then to provide for the fire department the maximum amount of security and, and safely protect them so that they could continue to put the fires out. Many of the residents in that area basically came running to us to tell us about situations or where gatherings of people were, or where potentially a sniper had been sighted previous to our arrival, and, and then we would go in and, and follow up on those actions.

00:16:47:00

Interviewer:

OK, let's stop.

[cut]

[wild sound]

Interviewer:

Did you ever personally experience hostility—

[picture resumes]

Interviewer:

—of what was going on and the potential of what was going on.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Take 10.

00:16:54:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Marker.

[slate]

00:16:56:00

Interviewer:

OK, so the Army Intelligence briefing.

Howard Becker:

The Army Intelligence briefed through the division headquarters, the 46th Division Headquarters of the Michigan National Guard as to the dangers that we may come up against, paramedical or, [sighs] medical [laughs]—

Interviewer:

OK, let's start again.

00:17:16:00

Howard Becker:

Yeah. It'd be para, start, start right from the beginning.

00:17:20:00

Interviewer:

Can we start again with the Army Intelligence?

Camera Crew Member #1:

[unintelligible]

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

00:17:22:00

Howard Becker:

The Army Intelligence Agency from—

Interviewer:

Oh, sorry.

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark.

00:17:31:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Marker.

[slate]

00:17:33:00

Interviewer:

OK. So in terms of the potential of paramilitary organization, what were you briefed?

00:17:38:00

Howard Becker:

The Army Intelligence Agency briefed the various elements of the 46th Infantry Division here in Michigan regarding the, the possibilities of paramilitary organizations that could be operating in the Detroit area. And so, through the Army Intelligence that was passed on to us we were prepared for a fighting force that perhaps could come at us at, at various times. So we tried to maximize our protection for our troops, alert them to the fact that if they spotted paramedi—paramilitary organizations, they was to report it instantly, to take cover and be prepared to defend themselves.

00:18:27:00

Interviewer:

What kind of groups did they expect, and what kind of paramilitary activity?

00:18:31:00

Howard Becker:

The paramilitary that we expect, or possibly could expect was the possibility of six- and eight-man squads operating in and about the areas to keep the fire departments from fighting fires, and also in and about the crowded areas where gatherings of, of, of people in a riot and then being encouraged to participate in the looting, and then further to participate in, in the firebombing of, of other buildings.

00:19:09:00

Interviewer:

As the week went on did you think that was happening?

00:19:12:00

Howard Becker:

No, as the week went on I realized that there were less activity or less chances of there being a organization of such in the area.

00:19:25:00

Interviewer:

And let me just quickly ask you one, the, the, question again about the police. In terms of the mood of what was coming at you, the possibility that some of these policeman might not be on the up and up. That you had heard stories. Can you tell me about that again?

00:19:38:00

Howard Becker:

Well, we had seen for a fact that here's two squad cars come in with four police officers in each squad car from the downtown Detroit area. Every one of them had loaded shotguns, they had extra pistols, and it seemed as though they were over-armed for a policing action. And as time went on, of course, that got reduced out and as, as we demonstrated that, while we were armed, we were using the least amount of resistance as was necessary because we were dealing with, with our own citizens of, of Michigan, and most of them were good solid citizens too.

00:20:28:00

Interviewer:

Great, OK. Cut. Thank you very much.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:20:57:00

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