

**ORAL HISTORY OF
RICHARD KIRKLAND BOWDEN
First Interview
November 28, 2007**

This interview is being conducted on behalf of the Oral History Project of the Historical Society of the District of Columbia Circuit. The interviewee is Richard Kirkland Bowden, and the interviewer is Joshua Klein. The interview took place on November 28, 2007. This is the first interview.

Mr. Klein: Mr. Bowden, I think I'll start by asking you to give us an overview of your life and the various interesting segments of it.

Mr. Bowden: First of all, my name is Richard Kirkland Bowden. I was born in Memphis, Tennessee, December 24, 1935. I attended public high schools in Memphis and college in Memphis – LeMoyne College. I entered the military in 1954, the United States Air Force, honorably discharged in 1958. I came to Washington, D.C., joined the Metropolitan Police Department in 1958 to 1962. Then the United States Marshals Service in June 1962 and retired January 1987. Came back as a contract employee in the Marshals Service in 1990, 1991, and I am presently a contract employee.

Mr. Klein: Expanding on what you just said, I think you said you'd like to start with talking about your career in the U.S. Air Force?

Mr. Bowden: Yes. I entered the United States Air Force with the intention of becoming a pilot, and after completing the written exams, I took the physical. I thought I had done well on the physical. I found out that at some point in some of the questionnaires I had indicated that I had injured my knee while playing basketball. That injury was not a serious one, didn't require any medical attention, but it was documented, and I was told that because of that knee injury, I could not become a pilot in the United States Air Force. I was told later by a person of authority that

they had their quota of African-American pilots so I was redlined and put in another career field, which turned out to be in law enforcement.

Mr. Klein: When you said they had their quota of African-American pilots, I assume it was a very low quota, it could not have been very common. You were not running into a lot of African-American pilots on base, is that right?

Mr. Bowden: That's right. Remember now this is 1954, and the person told me, told me in strict confidence, that they had their quota of African-American pilots and had processed them all. So my first assignment was at the Lackland Air Force Base in basic training. I was teaching remedial math, and I found that very boring. But to my surprise, it may have been the best thing that happened to me. I was being investigated for a possible career as a criminal investigator. One weekend I was visited in my room by three men who interrogated me about my background and how I grew up and that type of thing. I was whisked off to California, where I went into intensive training in criminal investigation. Subsequently assigned to the Criminal Investigation Unit in the United States Air Force, and that's where I did my career in the investigative capacity. While there, one of my commanding officers had a brother who was a high-ranking officer here in the Metropolitan Police Department. When I approached him at the time of my discharge, my commanding officer wanted me to stay in the military, but I thought I should move on. He said if I wanted to stay in law enforcement and if I was ever in Washington, D.C., to look up his brother. He gave me his brother's name, and after I was discharged, I did come to Washington, D.C. and looked his brother up. On a Thursday, I believe. That Friday, I took the written exam, and they called

me that Monday, and I was sworn in as a Metropolitan Department police officer in 1958. I worked as a Metropolitan police officer assigned to the Morals Division. In that division, we had the Narcotics Section, the Prostitution Section, and Gambling and Liquor Section. So my primary concentration was in the narcotics undercover capacity. There came a time when I realized that there were no more advancement possibilities in the Metropolitan Police Department, and I had had some interfacing with members of the United States Marshals Service in Washington, D.C. So I applied for a position as a deputy in the United States Marshals Office here in Washington, D.C., and was accepted in June of 1962.

Mr. Klein: I'd like to go back and ask you a little bit more about the Air Force and the Metropolitan Police. First, in the Air Force, what kinds of investigations were you doing?

Mr. Bowden: Criminal investigations. Many of the cases I worked on were with internal staff of government property. I was in the Strategic Air Command, and a lot of aircraft, for obvious reasons, were under high security, and very limited people had access to them, for obvious reasons. Some of the aircraft had what they called 800-day clocks in them. There were personnel who were removing the clocks, unauthorized removing of those clocks, and selling them on the market, on the black market. They were very expensive pieces of equipment and also required the aircraft not being able to fly because they didn't have that timepiece.

Mr. Klein: What is an 800-day clock?

Mr. Bowden: It's a mechanism in the cockpit that keeps exact time, and it ran on the system outside of the aircraft itself for 800 days. So they were very valuable on the

market. So people were taking them out of the aircraft and building clocks for home use, fancy handcrafts and that kind of stuff.

Mr. Klein: When you say Strategic Air Command, those were aircraft carrying nuclear weapons?

Mr. Bowden: Yes. Remember this is 1954, 1955, 1956. We were just getting out of Korea at the time, so they were armed aircraft. I did a lot of penetration of secure installations to check the security detection that the command, the base, was setting up.

Mr. Klein: What would that involve? The penetration?

Mr. Bowden: Presently, most government buildings you go in now you must show an ID card or a photo ID to enter the building. They didn't have magnetometers in those days, but they did have picture IDs. Picture IDs were color-coded, some of them had number codes that permitted you to go from one position to another position within a confined area on the base. One of my tasks was to penetrate that as an unauthorized person. So I used some various ruses in order to gain access to areas that I should not be in. When I did, then I had to leave a message to verify that I was there. For instance, a vulnerable part of an air base is the tower. If a terrorist wanted to take down an air base, the first place they'd go is the tower. You take the tower down, you've pretty well crippled the aircraft coming and going because they didn't have communication from the tower. So one of my responsibilities was to penetrate that security, to get into the tower and disseminate a bomb in the tower or to disseminate poison gas, something that would disable the personnel that were operating that tower. There were radar

sites off-post that were scanning the skies. My mission was to penetrate that, to disable that site, so that an enemy aircraft, if it was disabled, could penetrate the perimeter, take advantage of that being disabled.

Mr. Klein: What kind of ruses would you use to get in?

Mr. Bowden: First of all I had to come up with a false ID, so I would get on base the best way I could, sometimes with fraudulent paperwork that made it appear that I was assigned to a particular division. I would just stand around and wait for my opportunity for someone in a public place, maybe they'd take their coat off and they'd have their badge attached to it. I'd take the badge and use their badge to gain access. Sometimes I would take their badge, take it back to my hotel, take their picture out, put my picture in, put a picture of a gorilla or whatever I thought would get me through the checkpoint. Sometimes I would secrete myself in a vehicle that I knew was going to an area that was restricted. You stand around and you watch the security procedure, and you see who's lax and who's not lax, and you take advantage of that, particularly in the wee hours of the morning. I remember very distinctly Caribou, Maine, in November or December. My mission was to penetrate that airbase up there. When I got there, they had 67 inches of snow on the ground. The first thing I noticed there was no fence around the parked aircraft because the snow had covered the fence. No one had thought to put an extension on top of that in order to protect from walking along the backside of the airbase up to the aircraft. They had military personnel outside in winter gear walking around the aircraft. It was something like 40 below zero, wind blowing, snow blowing. They were there for four hours on their shift.

Their concentration, their concern, began to wane after a while. So I would wait until they slowed their walk down, set down between the wheels of the aircraft to stay warm, and I'd go in and do my bidding and leave my simulated bomb. Then I'd make my report, call it in as to where I left the object and identify what aircraft. I'd be out of the area by then. Of course there was no way to connect me physically with the mission. So I would maybe hit four or five aircraft that night. I may have been in the area two weeks in order to get the confidence in the personnel. Sometimes you walk by an officer two or three times, speak to him and wave to him, he gets to see your face, and then the next time you walk by without an ID card, just speak to him, he doesn't look at the ID card. That's a violation. A physical check should be done each time. So you do what you have to do in order to gain entry.

Mr. Klein: So you were doing what sounds to me like very high-level security infiltration, testing the security. You said there was no opportunity for advancement in the Air Force, so could you explain more about that?

Mr. Bowden: Well, I'm not bitter, it just didn't come. One thing, I moved around a lot. I only had two commanders, but I was never physically with the commanders. I was off other places. We communicated mostly by either teletype or by telephone. I was later given an American Express card for expenses so I could do my infiltration stuff. And so I was not seen, if you will, by anyone, only by written report or by verbal report. I guess they didn't see it necessary to promote a person who was not physically there.

Mr. Klein: Again, we're talking 1954 to 1958. Besides what you heard about the pilot entry selection, was there visible, evident racism in the military, in the Air Force?

Mr. Bowden: As far as I know, at that time I never heard of or saw another African-American investigator. There may have been, but I was a young fellow at the time and it wasn't high on my list. I was having a great time. I was enjoying the career, the travel, the adventure, so looking at the racial issue was not what I was about – because I was a military person in a civilian life, if you will. I didn't wear a uniform unless I was actually on base. If you were in civilian clothes you drew attention, so if you were on base, you wore a uniform. I had uniforms, so I wore whatever I thought would get me through the day. If I wanted to get into an area where officers did not go, only enlisted people, I would wear a uniform with the enlisted insignia. I'd try to blend in with the environment. If I wanted to get into the officer's club, where I would sit and listen to hear what was going on, then I would disguise myself as an officer. You had to play the role.

Mr. Klein: Did you like that?

Mr. Bowden: I did. Time just went "whoosh." When I looked up, I had been in four years, had been around the world two or three times, enjoying it. I was not bitter.

Mr. Klein: What rank did you leave the military?

Mr. Bowden: I was not a commissioned officer. I was an enlisted person. So I left as a Technical Sergeant.

Mr. Klein: When you went to the Metropolitan Police?

Mr. Bowden: The interesting thing about it is that I took the exam, I believe, on Friday, and got a phone call that Monday, and they told me to report. I was sworn in that

Monday. I did not go to Metropolitan Police training until I had been on the Department over two years. I was sworn in by a Deputy Chief, and he sent me directly to the Morals Division. I didn't go inside that building headquarters for two years. It's right across the street from this courthouse, 300 Indiana Avenue. I worked in the streets. I had two contact detectives. They would bring me my advance funds that I would need to operate. I would give them the drugs that I purchased, whatever documentation that I had, in a meeting place. I didn't wear a badge nor carry a gun or anything to identify myself as a police officer for two years. At that time, there were eleven people assigned to the Narcotics Division at the Metropolitan Police Department. We covered the entire city of Washington. The drug of choice at that time was heroin.

Mr. Klein: What would be involved in an operation? How did you operate?

Mr. Bowden: I played the life of a drug addict, and all I was doing was making purchases in an area where it was known that drugs were being sold or distributed. I would always try to get to the source of the drug, I suppose, with an addict who only has drugs on his person because he needs the drugs to survive. I was looking for the supplier. So I had to work my way in and up through the chain. Sometimes my contact officers would introduce me to someone whom they had cultivated as an informant who would lead me for a while. And then we would separate and I would go on my own, not to identify him or her as a person who'd introduce me to the source or introduced me to the supply line. So I was able to function in that way. Most of the traffic at that time was concentrated in the northwest section of the city. A few cases in southeast, but most of the drugs were concentrated in the

northwest section of the city. So a small geographical area that I was working. A lot of people, but a small area.

Mr. Klein: I imagine that being undercover like that is really full-time, 24 hours.

Mr. Bowden: No. That was the joy of it. Because traditionally, by nature, drug addicts don't hang out a lot. They go in and make their purchase and leave. Go shoot the drugs and enjoy their high in seclusion, out of the public. So I could go at any time of the day or night and make a buy, and then the rest of the time was my free time. So it was not a demanding hourly job – it was just being at the right place at the right time. There were certain times of the day when drugs are more plentiful on the street than other times. We're talking about heroin.

Mr. Klein: But what about staying in character all the time? Or were you able to live a separate life, an ordinary life?

Mr. Bowden: I lived a very normal life. I was single at the time. Many of my friends and associates didn't know what I did for a living. My apartment was near the Howard University campus. I did that deliberately, so I could mingle with my age group. So many of my friends and associates were students at Howard University and they thought I was a student at the University. So if you know the city, Howard University was near where, at that time, the heroin traffic was plentiful, around 14th and U, 7th and U, 14th and P, Swann Street, Corcoran, and further south. So it was always walking distance from where I lived, and it was walking distance from the campus. So if I was seen on the U Street corridor by a student, it would not be unusual for me to be in the U Street corridor, going to a movie or going to a club or something. And if I was seen up on Georgia Avenue

by someone who was in the drug culture, I wouldn't be out of place because that's where students go. So it was a good location for me to live and to socialize. Of course you dressed differently when you – sometimes when I'm working cases, I would stay away from the campus because the way I was dressed I would be in character. After that two-year period of undercover, I came off the streets and went into plain clothes, and I was working out of 300 Indiana Avenue.

Mr. Klein: Just to ask more about the undercover period, it sounds like these were the years 1958 to 1960?

Mr. Bowden: Exactly.

Mr. Klein: Were there times when you felt your cover was blown or that you were in danger?

Mr. Bowden: No. When I left the undercover capacity and went into the plain clothes capacity, that meant I was riding in a squad car. Folk who I had seen earlier didn't recognize me. I had a situation where they once detailed me to the gambling and liquor squad. There was a fellow in the District who had several after-hour places. After-hour meaning in those days whiskey stores, ABC stores, closed I believe at 11:00, so if you wanted to buy a bottle of whiskey after 11:00, you couldn't get it from the ABC store. So there were people in private homes who sold whiskey without a license. And on weekends the bars quit selling whiskey after 12:00 on Saturday, so if you wanted a drink after 12:00, you had to go to an after-hour place. A speakeasy. There was one fellow who had several of them. I was able to go in and out of there with the greatest of ease. It got to the place that he had someone take a picture of me out on the street, posted a picture on the side of the door. He said look at the picture. If this guy knocks on the door, don't let

him in. He's the police. I'd knock on the door, the guy would look at the picture, look at me, and say come on in. Maybe I just looked like the average Joe. So, no forced entry. I'd just walk up and knock on the door. He'd say, come on in. I'd go in and make my buy, or go in and sit around and laugh and talk. It was a fun thing as far as I was concerned. But I was making good cases.

I never, never made a report that I didn't feel comfortable with. If I made a narcotic buy, I wouldn't make just one, I'd make three, four, five. Because I wanted to be able to sit in a grand jury or look anyone in the eye and say I made these purchases from that person, I'm convinced that person is in the drug business as opposed to happenstance. I've seen addicts who would spend their last money and buy caps and then realize he didn't have anything to eat so he'd sell somebody else a cap just to get \$2 or \$4 or \$5 so he could do something else. To me he's not selling drugs. Legally yes, but he's not the guy I'm after. You appreciate what I'm saying? He's not the dealer that I was after. I was after the guy who's not addicted, he's in it strictly for the profit.

Mr. Klein: Does this give you a certain perspective on what you've seen in the trials, you've seen later on, you know, more recently?

Mr. Bowden: I look at it with different eyes. I look at the cases now with eyes that other folk may not look at cases with. I wrote a paper back in the 1950s to my commanding officer in the Narcotic Division because I saw what heroin was doing to the community, the drug itself, and I proposed that they legalize heroin, with very very rigid restrictions. I saw some property, a building, Whitelaw Apartments, that at the time was vacant, and I used to hang around in that area, and I said,

“That would be an ideal stop to set up a clinic and staff it with medical people – nurses, doctors, psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, the whole gang.”

Because I knew a lot of drug users, addicts, good people. One guy, Hezekiah Blue. He was a graduate from Howard University School of Architecture. Smart as a whip. Read three newspapers every day and could talk to you about everything he read. Couldn’t keep a job because he was addicted to heroin. First of all, he was a black architect. There weren’t many positions for him, to begin with. Now he’s got this drug problem. A wasted man. Very articulate, knowledgeable, but he’s an addict. He died, literally died, on the streets of Washington. My proposal was to go in and sit at the table with all these professionals and qualify as an addict, get a card. And when you need your drug, come here to this spot, they will give you the drug, you use it right here, then go the other way. The police commanders told me I was mad, out of my mind.

Years later, they came up with methadone, but that wasn’t the answer. I’m talking about heroin. There are some people who are called chippers. They only shoot a little bit of heroin just to keep them still on that high. They don’t nod. They don’t go into the depth of illusions, they don’t lose consciousness, and they are not addicted, but they are controlled addicted, if that makes any sense to you. They use just enough to maintain that modicum of calmness, if you will, about the body. He’s a chipper. He’s not mainlining, and he has not lost control. Just to keep them going. And they only do it on weekends. Interesting. During the week, full-time employee. People who work with him every day never know that

he uses drugs. Because in those days there was no urinalysis. But on the weekends, he chips. He starts coming down Friday, chips all weekend.

Mr. Klein: Was the drug trade that you were investigating violent?

Mr. Bowden: No. Heroin addicts are unique people. They'll steal. They'll lie. Can't give them a gun. They won't break into your house. Very rarely have I heard of an addict breaking into someone's house. They'll break into a car. Take your camera, anything of value, but he'll move quickly. To get the nerve enough to get into somebody's house, very rare. Very docile. Laid back, cool, just wants to enjoy his high. But then it gets out of control, and that's when you see them walking down the street nodding, saliva dripping from his mouth, he's lost control. That's the guy I'm talking about, who would have benefitted from going to that treatment place.

Mr. Klein: It sounds like you actually have a lot of compassion for the users.

Mr. Bowden: Oh yeah. I would follow a dealer all day long if necessary. Time meant nothing to me as long as I felt I could accomplish what I wanted. I did it legally. Never a hummer.

Mr. Klein: What's a hummer?

Mr. Bowden: Lie on a guy, a dealer, do it illegally. I had one guy who I knew was a dealer, and I knew he had drugs in his pockets, but I had no legal reason to search him. I'd follow him for about five hours. He came to the courthouse. I knew he had drugs on him, he had a lot of drugs on him. I knew that. Came to the courthouse, reported to his probation officer, and left. He went to 5th and G Streets, there was a newspaper stand.

Mr. Klein: G Street, Northwest?

Mr. Bowden: Northwest. There was a newspaper stand where you'd put a coin in. In those days it was 5 cents to get the paper. Someone in front of him put a coin in, opened the tray, and got a newspaper out. He grabbed the tray and got a newspaper and didn't pay for it. I said, "Gotcha!" I arrested him for petty larceny. I handcuffed him right there and walked him from 5th and G to Indiana Avenue, did not search him. He said, "Why are you arresting me?" I said, "Because you stole a newspaper." He says, "It's only 5 cents." I said, "It's petty larceny, a newspaper." In front of uniformed officers and everybody. He looked at me and asked why I was messing with him. I said, "Search him." I didn't want to search him. I wanted somebody else to find the drugs. They found the drugs. See, when I cuffed him behind, I knew he couldn't get rid of the drugs. I was not in a hurry. I'd been with him all day long. Another half hour, 45 minutes, was not going to hurt me. But I wanted these drugs to be found by someone else, and I wanted them found in front of several folk so he could never say anything other than "they came out of my pocket." Those were the kind of cases that I worked on.

Mr. Klein: You have to be pretty crafty and patient, it sounds.

Mr. Bowden: That's what it's all about. Because I learned a long time ago in law enforcement that you wait a while, they'll come back every time. They had in the District of Columbia a law called the Blue Miller Law. I don't know whether it's still on the books or not, but in essence what that law was, a person who has been convicted of a narcotic violation could not be seen in or frequent a known area where

narcotics are sold or distributed. So if you saw him there, as an officer, you had to interview him on three different occasions to show consistency that he hangs around there. Then you arrest him for narcotics vagrancy under the Blue Miller Law. I used that as a cushion to go someplace else. That's how you develop informants. Now I know this guy has drugs on him, and I know if he has drugs on him, he's got a dealer. He's an addict. I've seen him make his buy. When he leaves, I stop him. I'd say, "Hi Josh, how are you doing?" "Oh I'm doing all right." "You know, we've got to have this little conversation, Josh, you understand that, don't you?" "Yes sir." "I'm not going to search you. Don't worry, you're all right. If I let you go, you know what will happen if I see you again." I see him again, "Hi Josh..." Third time, "Josh, that pocket right there, turn it inside out." He turns it inside out. A pill falls. "Oh, what is that?" "I'd grind it up. I'd see him a fourth time, "Josh, here's what I want you to do."

Mr. Klein: So you build up a few favors first, and then use the user to get at the person who is selling?

Mr. Bowden: Sure. I'd say, "Josh, I need you to do this for me. I need to meet so-and-so, just one time." You know what I'm saying?

Mr. Klein: You'd have him make the introduction, and then he's gone, and then you do the buy?

Mr. Bowden: I do what I have to do. Never involve Josh. And you're happy. Every time I see you, you're happy. Today, 2007, at basketball games, football games, I run into people who I treated the same way I treated you. They say, "Hey man, how you doing? You all right?" Some of them come down to this courthouse, their

grandson, they say “You still around?” I say, “Yeah, you still around?” “You an all right guy.” And they tell their family, “This man here, he’s all right.”

Because he was not a dealer, he was a user. When I knew him.

Mr. Klein: Do you think police work has changed with the change in drug laws?

Mr. Bowden: With the change in drug laws and with change in people. Crack as we know it changed everything in terms of the criminals on the street. The violence went up. The relationship between police and the streets, police and the community, changed. People have gotten more legally sophisticated, so your approach now as a law enforcement officer has to be the strictest in what you do and what you say, when you do it and when you say it – because everybody now is a constitutional expert, and they look for that violation in the prosecution. Which as it should be. But it makes it more difficult to get at what your mission is, to get the drugs off the street. To threaten a person with jail now, you just can’t do that.

Mr. Klein: What do you mean threaten someone with jail?

Mr. Bowden: “If you don’t straighten up, I’m going to lock you up.” They’ll run to their lawyer: “Mr. So-and-So threatened to lock me up for no reason at all.” A lot of times you do that just to let them know you know what they’re doing, but you don’t make that arrest.

As I told you earlier, the general overall office was the Morals Division, and in that division was the Narcotics Division, Prostitution Division, and Gambling and Liquor. I talked a little bit about the narcotics, a little bit about violation of the ABC laws, and one other section was the lottery. In those days, it was called the numbers game. In the 1970s they had a legal lottery in the District of Columbia.

But in the 1950s, there were street numbers, and the numbers were dictated by the folk who controlled the illegal gambling in the community. And that was a fraternity of violators, if you will. They were violating the law, but they were good people, if you will. Nonviolent. Many of them were big financial contributors to the community financially. I know several people, who were in the numbers business, who paid tuition for non-relatives in the community. They saw a young man or a young lady who had potential to go to college but didn't have the money. I know some number of them, who were in the numbers business, saw to it that tuition was paid. Oftentimes anonymously, but it got paid. That was one area that I really didn't enjoy as a law enforcement officer, the numbers violators, violators of ABC laws and prostitution. At that time, I considered those victimless crimes because I never knew of a person who was running the numbers as the term goes, or backing the numbers, come up to you and ask you to play a number. They just didn't do that. You had to seek them out to play the numbers. That was your choice. Violators of the ABC laws, after-hour, speakeasies, there were no neon signs, no business cards, no written invitation. You knocked on that door to go in and to spend your money when you couldn't buy the whiskey or beer at a licensed place. I only worked those cases because it was a violation of the law, but my heart wasn't in it. Oftentimes, the man who ran the after-hours club also banked numbers. He's just a businessman. He didn't have a license to run that business.

Mr. Klein You said prostitution?

Mr. Bowden: I wasn't really gung-ho about prostitution, because prostitution is a contract between a man and a woman. Because I know, I've seen guys who work construction, their only job. The guy gets up at 6:00 in the morning and gets off at 3:00 or 4:00 in the afternoon. He works hard all day long, five, six days a week. He doesn't have the time, nor possibly the energy, to woo or to court, to go to dinner, go dancing. But he has biological needs. He's not a rapist. Here is a lady, who's of age, who has two or three children, single parent, limited education, limited income, who is willing to accommodate the construction worker for a fee. Where is the harm? His biological needs are met. Goes back to work, he's happy all week. She has some additional income to feed and clothe her children. Maybe she doesn't pay taxes. I just didn't see – I didn't put the energy in it that I did with the guy who's selling drugs, who's pushing that dangerous drug, tearing up families, tearing up lives, destroying folk for the money.

Mr. Klein: Is there anything more we should cover about the Metropolitan Police Department before moving on to your decision to join the Marshals Service?

Mr. Bowden: Well, when I went into plain clothes, I had to train and educate undercover folk, and there were some coming in who did not know heroin from baking soda. Didn't know marijuana from Old Gold Cigarettes, never seen it. I taught, trained, educated those who didn't know the language, didn't know the street language. From Walla Walla, Kansas, or somewhere in the hills of Pennsylvania, that didn't have a clue. I walked him through. Six months, a year later, he's promoted, I'm

not. I saw where it was headed. It's not here. So when the opportunity to come to the Marshals Service presented itself, I went.

Mr. Klein: How did the opportunity with the Marshals Service present itself?

Mr. Bowden: The United States Marshal in the District of Columbia at the time was Luke C. Moore, who had been an Assistant U.S. Attorney prior to his appointment as a Marshal. He's originally from Memphis, Tennessee, my home. His younger brother and I were classmates in high school and then in college, so I knew the family well. He knew me in terms of being from Memphis. We didn't chum around together because he was older. While I was on the Police Department, I was working a big case, a big narcotic case, in an undercover capacity. I had gone back undercover while in the squad just for this one particular case, and I'd made a buy, a big buy, then I was home. I wrote my report and affidavit in support of the search and warrant, left it on the desk in the squad room. My colleague read it, came to me, in the squad car, told me come on, let's take a ride. I go. Summer Sunday. I lie down in the back seat. He was signaling to me. So we went across town.

Mr. Klein: You were lying down in the back seat of the cruiser while he was driving?

Mr. Bowden: Yes. We went across town, he stopped the car, tooted the horn, a guy came out. My colleague says, "Do you know this man?" pointing to me. The fellow looks down and says, "that's Something Slim." That was my name on the street, Something Slim. He said, "He's the police." The guy said, well you got him. My colleague drove off. I said, "Man what the hell is going on?" When I got home, he dropped me off, I went to Luke Moore, who was an Assistant U.S.

Attorney then, and told him what had happened because I was scared. I went and talked to someone and got some advice, and the advice was to write up my report as to what happened and give him a copy, and let's see how it flows. The warrant was never executed. As a matter of fact, I was told to take two weeks' vacation. I said I don't have any place to go. Work was vacation to me, because I was enjoying it. Just take some time off, and so I did. The warrant was never executed. Two or three months later, I was coming out of a theatre on U Street. It was snowing, I was with my girlfriend trying to get a cab. This guy walked up to me and said, "Why are you getting a cab?" I said, "Because I don't have a car." He said, "I just brought you a car." The young lady I'm with thinks that I'm a student at Howard University. She looked at me like what is going on, so I excuse myself. He said, "I bought you a brand new Oldsmobile, green and beige, just the shade you wanted." I knew who had a green and beige new Oldsmobile in the squad. I led the guy to the car and said, "I don't want your car, nothing from you." I went back and got a cab. The next day I went to the office and told this person, "Let me see the registration to that car." He showed it to me, and it was in my name. I said, "Come on." We went downstairs. We're going to change this registration now. He did. The person I had gotten advice from, I told him what happened. He said, just wait it out, see what happens. I did not know at the time, but this person was under investigation. My colleague was already under investigation, I didn't know it.

Mr. Klein: Was this the same man, the one who had the car the same one who had driven you across town to see the dealer?

Mr. Bowden: Yes. So he went back to the guy and told him in order for that warrant to disappear, I needed a car. You follow me?

Mr. Klein: Yes.

Mr. Bowden: Some time later, two or three months as best as I can figure, he was arrested, went to the penitentiary, served five years. I said it's time to get out of here, so I went and applied for the United States Marshals Office. I went to Luke Moore, who was then the United States Marshal, I told him that I needed to get out of that police department.

Mr. Klein: This was 1962?

Mr. Bowden: June 1962. So I filled out applications and that kind of stuff. So it took some time, some background. This was January, 1962, I believe. It took some time to do the background, but I came into the Marshals Office in 1962.

Mr. Klein: So you join the Marshals Service in June of 1962. Tell me about your start with the Marshals Service.

Mr. Bowden: It was a new experience. I had no idea what the scope of the responsibilities were, except I knew that they had accompanied us on search and arrest warrants, because in those days when we got a warrant from the United States District Court, most of the warrants we got from the U.S. Commissioner. The U.S. Commissioner predated the United States Magistrate. The U.S. Commissioner had limited authority, not as broad as the Magistrate's authority is now. But you presented your warrant to the U.S. Commissioner, and that warrant would always say, "From the President of the United States to the United States Marshal of the District of Columbia or his designated agent." So all of the District of Columbia

warrants, or the warrants that we in the Metropolitan Police Department sought, had that language on them. So a search warrant, if we thought it was going to be a fairly good seizure out of U.S. District Court, we would always have a deputy marshal along with us who did absolutely nothing but just stood around and watched.

Mr. Klein: So you didn't have to have the deputy marshal for every warrant, but if it was an important one or big one?

Mr. Bowden: If the Commissioner signed it, you had to have one.

Mr. Klein: I see. Who else would sign warrants?

Mr. Bowden: Nobody but the Commissioner. I don't remember ever getting a warrant signed by a United States District Court Judge.

Mr. Klein: So every search warrant that was executed had a U.S. Marshal riding along?

Mr. Bowden: That I can recall.

Mr. Klein: Were all the cases in the U.S. District Court then?

Mr. Bowden: Primarily. All of your common-law cases were tried over here. Robbery, assault, carrying a pistol without a license, unauthorized use of a motor vehicle, breaking and entering, grand larceny, those kind of cases were tried here. Rape was tried here in this Court. All those search warrants – and I know search warrants had them, I don't know whether arrest warrants insisted the deputy marshal be there. I know the search warrant did. So that was my introduction to the Marshals Office. I thought, this was a pretty cool job, standing around. So I had invested a lot in law enforcement, and I knew him, made my application, so that's how I got

in the Marshals Service. Then that September, October, things jumped off down in Oxford, Mississippi. So I had that exposure, that experience.

Mr. Klein: Can you explain that?

Mr. Bowden: James Meredith, an African-American, had made application to go to the University of Mississippi – Ole Miss – as a student, and had been denied. The court order was issued, and there had been some confrontation between the administration and his admittance. So they activated the United States Marshals Service to go down and execute, to make sure that court order was executed. This office, that is, the U.S. Marshals Office in the District of Columbia, was the lead agency in the Marshals Service, because it was close to Justice. The Director at the time, James McShane, he was close to the administration in terms of –

Mr. Klein: So the name was?

Mr. Bowden: James McShane. He was the Director of the United States Marshals Service. Luke Moore was the United States Marshal for the District of Columbia – who incidentally was the first African-American to be appointed United States Marshal in the continental United States since Frederick Douglass. I say continental United States because there was a Marshal, African-American, who had been appointed in the Virgin Islands. That's why I said continental United States. Because some historian might catch that. So it was decided that the initial wave of marshals to go down would be white deputies, for obvious reasons. They didn't want to exacerbate the situation by bringing in African-American deputies. So we were on the second wave, off campus – three, four, five, six of us there. After he, Meredith, was admitted, the confrontation had already been documented

as to what happened on that night, so I don't need to go into that. But from my side of it, this is what I can talk about. We African-American deputies didn't get involved until Meredith was actually on campus as a student. We were his protectors off campus. White deputies stayed in his room, went to class with him on campus. During non-campus activities, his social life, visiting his family, etc., that was our responsibility, that is, African-Americans. Shopping, that kind of stuff. Speaking of going shopping, in the height of his being on campus, the media, big coverage, both print and television media – every day was James Meredith, James Meredith, James Meredith. He wanted to do some Christmas shopping for his family, so two of us took him shopping. He got whatever he was getting and was getting ready to check out with the cashier. He presented his credit card. The lady picked the credit card up, looked at it, and said, "Do you have any more identification?" I couldn't resist it. I said, "Miss, do you think that anybody else with their right mind would be in the middle of Mississippi saying they were James Meredith, other than the real James Meredith?" I just couldn't imagine her reading this name and asking for further identification. Maybe she wasn't up on what was going on around her, or she was just so stuck on protocol, that James Meredith meant nothing, I got to have another. Of course, he had another identification. But it struck me as very, very strange, as very strange.

Mr. Klein: Did she say anything back about that?

Mr. Bowden: By that time he had it out. You've got to understand, we didn't want any confrontation. We wanted to get in and get out as quickly and quietly as possible.

We don't want the world to know we were there. There were only two of us to begin with, because we don't want to go there with a bunch of folk and attract attention.

Mr. Klein: Were you in plain clothes?

Mr. Bowden: Of course. We were armed, but yes, we were in plain clothes, dressed very casual, no collar and tie. We tried to blend in with the community as best we could, to not look as though we were who we were. I couldn't resist the comment. But by that time, he had his ID out. She never let on to me basically that James Meredith meant anything. She rung it up, gave him his receipt, went on about her business.

Mr. Klein: Were there any altercations where you had to intercede to protect James Meredith's safety at any point?

Mr. Bowden: No. Now I say no because not on his person, but his house was shot at a couple times. Once he was in New York, during that same Christmas, I believe, Christmas break. He went up to New York. I didn't go. I don't know if anybody was with him from the Marshals Service, because once he got out of Mississippi, he was just another black guy out on the streets, so there was no need for coverage, if you will. So he may have been in New York alone, but I know his house was shot at. So there was a contingency of deputies. We rushed down to Mississippi and met him in Memphis so he could go to his family. So when you say to protect him, I want to make that clear. Not on his person. I was never with him when there was a personal attack on him.

Mr. Klein: How did the Marshals Service as an organization, or the D.C. Marshals Office, handle this very unusual task?

Mr. Bowden: It was a learning task. We had never had that kind of exposure, or that test before, except back in the 1950s. There were some Deputies who were in this initial group in Ole Miss that had been in Little Rock, so they were seasoned in terms of that effort. But we did it with small children in Little Rock, as opposed to adults in Mississippi, in terms of protection. We protect children different than you do adults, a family man. So for that, it was a learning experience. The only thing that was troubling when we went to Ole Miss was the equipment that we had. We had no equipment of our own. The gas grenades that we had the night of the confrontation, they were gas grenades that were World War II gas grenades that were on their way to being destroyed because they were aged, and they said we'll give them to these guys. Some of them were about to be salvaged. You pull a pin and throw it into the crowd. The crowd gets the shell and throws it into our ranks and they go off. Makes for a long night. The radios were hand-me-down WWII radios that the Army was getting ready to salvage. We had no riot gear as such. We had an 18-inch baton and an Army helmet that were hand-me-downs from the military that had been painted white and stenciled in U.S. Marshal.

Mr. Klein: Who were some of the other deputy marshals with you on this? Who was the other marshal on James Meredith's personal detail?

Mr. Bowden: James Freeman Palmer; Joseph Robinson, who is deceased; Howard Riley, who's still in the area; Cleveland Braxton, who's deceased; Oscar Spearman, who's still in the area, and Frank Lamondue. That's all I can recall.

Mr. Klein: Was there someone leading the team?

Mr. Bowden: Yes. The team leader, or the supervisor of the detail itself, was Clarence Butler, and then Frank Vandergriff. Frank is deceased. Clarence is in North Carolina last I heard. We used to talk often, but I've lost contact.

Mr. Klein: They had leadership roles within the Marshals Office?

Mr. Bowden: Yes, they were supervisors in the office and they, of course, were supervisors on site in Mississippi. Luke Moore, of course, was the leader, as the U.S. Marshal. He was in and out of Oxford. Marshal McShane was also in and out.

Mr. Klein: Did you have the feeling that you were participating in this historical event?

Mr. Bowden: No. Unfortunately, I didn't attach as much importance or historical significance to it as it developed. It was a detail, an assignment – let's keep this guy alive kind of thing and let's stay alive in the process. But I was a young fellow and didn't have the kind of foresight to say, "Oh wow, I'm making history." It didn't occur to me to take a camera and take pictures of this. First of all, I thought the whole process was silly. Why do we have to protect someone who is trying to go to school and get an education in America? Why do we have to fight this battle? And then it stopped, if you follow what I'm saying. My concerns stopped – this is the way it has to be so I have to do my job. I never thought to keep a diary of what I did, who I spoke to, who I saw, because it's going to be history.

Mr. Klein: Did your family or friends who were learning about this through the newspapers or TV that knew you were down there on detail, did they mention anything?

Mr. Bowden: My grandfather said, "Son, we're praying for you. Watch the people down there, they'll try to kill you." I guess when you're inside the forest, you know, you don't recognize the trees, I guess.

Mr. Klein: You had grown up in Memphis, which is South, but not Deep South, which is different.

Mr. Bowden: I see exactly where you're headed. In the community where I grew up, Memphis, Tennessee, was an all-black community, separate but not equal schools. I did not experience segregation directly, because if I bought a pair of shoes, I bought them from a black-owned shoe store. My community, was where I survived. Remember, I left at 18. Now outside of the community, I waited tables at one of the exclusive hotels in the South, the Peabody Hotel. That's where the ducks parade. So I knew what segregation was about at this time, but I didn't live in it. Do you follow what I'm saying? I knew my place on the bus, on the street car. But it was a short ride. My school, my high school, one through twelve, we had three Ph.D.'s teaching high school. My principal was a Ph.D., a qualified Ph.D., not an Internet Ph.D. So, they wanted to teach, not for the pay but that's what they liked to do. So my life was good in my community. On my high school campus, we had three asphalt tennis courts and three clay tennis courts. We had a nine-hole golf course, an Olympic-size swimming pool. It just wasn't integrated. It didn't occur to me, while I was playing tennis, that my opponent's not a white guy. I've got a good guy over here who's kicking me. So I didn't have that

confrontation, if you will, or the daily putting in your face that you're supposed to be a second-class citizen. Am I making sense to you?

Mr. Klein: Yes. So, was Oxford –

Mr. Bowden: It was not a coffee shop. Because I knew what Mississippi was about.

Remember now, I had been all over the country, all over the world, travelling, so I came back with a different head than when I left in 1954 to go into the military. I had been exposed. I spent two years in California, 18 months in North Africa, in and out. So when I went to Mississippi, I was an adult to a point. I hadn't matured if you will, so I thought this was over, we're not doing this anymore.

Mr. Klein: What was over?

Mr. Bowden: Arguing about blacks going to school. Why are we doing this? I thought this had been resolved. But it was not a culture shock. I knew I was in Mississippi. I knew my limitations. While in Mississippi, the second time we went down.

Mr. Klein: You went down twice then?

Mr. Bowden: Christmas I left and went back. Had the shooting, we went down, then I came back. So the second semester, that is, January to June, if I did go down I don't recall, but the following – something happened that caused us to go back down. I can't recall what it was. We thought everything had kind of smoothed out. When we would pick up Meredith on the Exchange, from the edge of the campus, to go wherever, State Troopers would follow us, not as friends but as foe. Wanted an excuse to stop us for a traffic violation. We knew that. But the second time we went down there, we thought things had changed. So we were at the airport in Jackson, Mississippi. I was a junior guy, a small contingency, maybe ten deputies

at best, maybe one other black deputy, but I was the junior person. The junior person does all the running. Someone said, "Take Kirk into town, go into the sheriff's office, see if we can borrow some of their vehicles. I did. Went into the sheriff's office. The desk sergeant there. Our credentials were a piece of paper that was mimeographed – do you know what a mimeograph is? No picture. It was typed on the card, "so-and-so, Deputy United States Marshal," somebody's signature. That's all it was. I showed this to the desk sergeant and told him I was a deputy marshal. He laughed. I mean a big laugh. He yelled in the back, "Somebody come by here" – using the N-word – "who says he's a U.S. Deputy Marshal – have you ever heard anything like that before in your life?" They called the Department of Justice to see whether or not there were any African-American Deputy United States Marshals. I was there a long time – half-hour, 45 minutes. While I was there, I looked on the wall. The "wanted" posters, sheriff's "wanted" posters, were segregated. Black wanted folk on one side, and white wanted folk on the other side.

Mr. Klein: Even the "wanted" posters.

Mr. Bowden: I knew where I was. So I got close and read the description. It was very comical. On the white, it said, "Sam Jones, 6'8", 3535 Wisconsin Avenue, wanted for robbery." The black side, "Joe Tribeau, goes under the name of 'Smoky,' speaks strange English, generally has an odor about him." Very, very detailed, you know what I'm saying? I just thought it was interesting. Needless to say I didn't get any vehicles.

Mr. Klein: Well I'm guessing there was a reason why the Mississippi Marshals Service wasn't asked to do this.

Mr. Bowden: By design, we excluded them from the detail completely. Mississippi Marshals were not involved, period. Because they have to live there. And rightfully so. They didn't need to be involved. I thought it was an excellent decision not to involve them. Their kids are in school.

Mr. Klein: Looking back on all this, now first of all it seems to me, I was just doing the math, you were about 27 years old when you were down there at the University of Mississippi. Now, with 45 years' distance from that, how do you put it all in perspective? The events you saw, and your role in it, and how the Marshals Service participated.

Mr. Bowden: First of all I want to commend the U.S. Marshals Service for the way they conducted themselves under adverse conditions. You hear the expression, "Cool heads prevailing." Those guys' heads weren't cool, they were frozen. They were not just cool, they were cold in terms of restraint. Because many – in those days, in order to become a Deputy U.S. Marshal, one of the requirements was that you had to have some prior law enforcement experience and some military experience. So I'm certain that those two criteria made it comfortable and convenient for them to have that restraint, because they had had, they functioned at some point in their career under some kind of pressure or some kind of exposure where you had to use that kind of restraint. I venture to say that a person with less experience, that is, no prior law enforcement experience, that is dealing with the public in a law enforcement capacity, military experience, would

have overreacted. Because if there ever was a time for you to strike back if you will, violently, and feel justified in doing it, that was the time to do it.

Particularly, when you've been shot at, and in some cases, some of your colleagues have been shot, as history tells you about the issue itself. I want to reemphasize the coolness of the men on the front lines. Even though that was my introduction, my experience in Mississippi, it gave me an opportunity to grow in law enforcement. It made me feel proud to be in the Marshals Service and to be an American, as I look back at it. I wouldn't trade that experience and other experiences I had in the Marshals Service – I wouldn't trade it. I guess that's why I'm here now today.