

The American Fighter Aces Association
Oral Interviews
The Museum of Flight
Seattle, Washington

Frederick Libby (Part 4 of 8)

Interviewed by: Eugene A. Valencia

Interview Date: circa March 1962

Abstract:

In this eight-part oral history, fighter ace Frederick Libby is interviewed about his life and his military service with the Royal Flying Corps during World War I. In part four, he discusses his time as an observer and pilot with various squadrons in France. Topics discussed include his thoughts on German and British pilots, military life in France and England, and mission logistics for squadrons.

The interview is conducted by fellow fighter ace Eugene A. Valencia.

Biography:

Frederick Libby was born in the early 1890s in Sterling, Colorado. He worked as an itinerant cowboy during his youth and joined the Canadian Army shortly after the outbreak of World War I. Deployed to France in 1915, Libby initially served with a motor transport unit, then volunteered for the Royal Flying Corps. He served as an observer with No. 23 Squadron and No. 11 Squadron, then as a pilot with No. 43 Squadron and No. 25 Squadron. Scoring a number of aerial victories during his RFC career, he became the first American fighter ace. Libby transferred to the United States Army Air Service in 1917 and was medically discharged soon after for spondylitis. As a civilian, he went on to embark on a number of business ventures, including founding the Eastern Oil Company and Western Air Express. Libby passed away in 1970.

Biographical information courtesy of: Libby, Frederick. Horses don't fly: The memoir of the cowboy who became a World War I ace. New York: Arcade, 2013.

Restrictions:

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Transcript:

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Index:

Close calls during combat missions.....	4
Thoughts on Oswald Boelcke and other German pilots	5
Military life and logistics, part one	7
Pilot training in England and meeting King George IV	8
Military life and logistics, part two.....	10
Reconnaissance mission to Valenciennes, France	11
Thoughts on aircraft markings, guns, and the RAF F.E.2b	13
Status as an American in the Royal Flying Corps	14

Frederick Libby (Part 4 of 8)

[START OF INTERVIEW]

00:00:00

[Close calls during combat missions]

EUGENE A. VALENCIA: Well, you were at 500 feet then, Captain.

FREDERICK LIBBY: Well, we crossed the line at about 500 feet, and we landed near an artillery emplacement. In other words, a hill at—it looked like a hill, but it was a quarters of this artillery outfit. And a major came out of there and ducked out of the ground. Can he do anything for him? Certainly you can do something for us. We can phone our unit. But in the meantime, I looked over this machine, and it goes back to what they've always said about the F.E.2b. If you don't kill the pilot or hit the engine with a propeller, no matter how much you shoot them apart, they all stagger home.

And this one had because the instruments in the pilot's office was all shot to pieces. My top gun had been shot through, and the struts, which hold the plane apart, two of those were shot entirely in two and limping. And one of the plane—top plane was right down, when we landed, on the other one. In addition to that, that plane was simply riddled with holes. But neither one of us had a wound or a hole in us, and the engine had not been touched. Now, which is something that you talk—you speak of luck. That is really luck. So slowly we went back to the air—the major sent his car down for us, and then the boys with the tender came down and picked up the old ship.

And the next morning, the sergeant rigger told me that they had counted 186 holes in the ship, and they'd also got two bursts through the main spar, the leading edge of the plane that holds the wings—the [unintelligible] wings—and that also one of the tail booms had been clipped with a bullet. Now, how that old F.E.2b would hang together—she was just weaving [unintelligible] together. It was a total write-off with the exception of the engine. The only thing that was left that they could salvage: the engine and the propeller of the ship. So you speak of luck and close calls, that was about as close as I had come to.

I had one other stint as a pilot that was just equally bad. But—well, it was a little closer. But this was as an observer and the closest, of course. But the pilot felt pretty bad. He asked me what I was going to report, and I, as the observer, did all the reporting. And I told him, “Well, you should be on a scout plane because if you're going to fly one of these things, you're going to have to depend on your observer or you won't be so fortunate next time, probably. But as far as I'm concerned, it just is one of those things

that we got shot at, we got in a mix-up, a dogfight, we got shot down, and we're—here we are.” Which I—

EAV: [overlapping] Captain—pardon me, sir.

FL: Go ahead.

00:03:19

[Thoughts on Oswald Boelcke and other German pilots]

EAV: What was the quality of the German pilots at this time?

FL: The German pilots were good. There's no use in kidding yourself they weren't. Their orders were to do it the way they did it, to stay on their side. They'd follow you right up to the top of their line and then they would break her off.

EAV: Is that so?

FL: They'd never come over. They never did. No, sir, mister. When they—their orders were, and they didn't. The only thing they ever sent over was a high-flying reconnaissance ship. They'd send him over once in a while. I sat up there—this is a later part of the story—in that D.H.4 at the last part of the war I was in. I sat up there at 22,500 in one of those trying to get one of those boys.

EAV: But I mean, during your time, during the first phases as an observer, the German pilots were of top quality?

FL: They were really top quality. That Boelcke [Oswald Boelcke] and Immelmann [Max Immelmann] and any other—a number of them. They were all top quality. And they were—I think they were a—in my book, they were a better class of fellows from a standpoint of “Hail fellow, well met.” That's what I'm trying to say. A friendship—they'd kill you, but they'd treat you right if you landed over in their country. And they were good fliers. They were crackerjacks. There was no—I don't think there was any better German flier ever lived than Boelcke or Immelmann.

EAV: It was really interesting last night, sir, when you mentioned that they would keep you informed of the pilots they had shot down.

FL: That what?

EAV: They would keep you informed—

FL: Well, that's one thing that Boelcke did until he was killed. And of course, after that, I think it ceased. I don't know. I, of course—I came back over here at the end of '17. I

don't know what they were doing. But I never had any knowledge of Richthofen [Manfred von Richthofen] ever—he was a head of that Circus—ever dropping anything across to our—

EAV: But Boelcke did during this time?

FL: Boelcke certainly did. He dropped many, many notes to the British. And here was a point. You get over there on the back side in a fight, and you get split up. You get home, and your [unintelligible] only probably, maybe, three out of six of you that come back. Now, whatever happened to the other three—you were busy in a fight. You can't tell what happened. You don't know. You may have some idea and you might catch it, but there's oftentimes that it's doubtful. Well, now, Boelcke used to—and he used to do it every week—drop over a note to what had happened to the boys that are down there, whether they were wounded or they were killed and if they were just engine trouble and plain prisoner-of-war. And we knew that. And we knew who we had over there all the time.

EAV: I understand they were treated very well, too.

FL: Oh, and not only that. They give them a—our fellows write over to us; we'd get a letter. [unintelligible], they'd give them a good champagne dinner that night in their mess. Take them over to their mess and give them a good send-off. Then they'd go to a prison camp, but they went to a decent one. And they even were allowed to batman. A batman was their—what we call a [striker?] over here, from our own prisoner-of-war. Say, one of our British infantrymen or something. He was allowed to—you were allowed him as your batman. They put him in there, and he's naturally glad to get it because he's treated better as a batman than he ever is any other way, you know what I'm saying? And he gets some of that officer food, and their food is good. They treated our boys real—the RFC, during Boelcke's day, was really treated fine. And Boelcke was probably the top man of all times, as far as I know.

EAV: How was he lost, sir?

FL: He crashed into another one of his own fliers in a fight—in a dogfight. They came together in doing a split-S turn. And the other guy escaped.

EAV: Is that so?

FL: The other guy got out and landed, but Boelcke was killed.

EAV: I understand when he was killed the squadrons flew over.

FL: Oh, yes. We went—not my squadron. But in our wing, one of our squadrons did drop over a wreath to Boelcke. And they did the same thing for our boy, Ball [Albert Ball]. He's the only one that I ever knew of that they did do that for.

EAV: The Germans [unintelligible]?

FL: Oh, yes. Actually, the Germans dropped the wreath over to Ball. Ball was a wonderful pilot. He had guts. He was a—and another thing about—was really proper about Ball. He wasn't boastful or you wouldn't know that he—nothing of the type, that he wasn't that type. Neither was Boelcke. Boelcke was a religious person, believe it or not. And he used to go and pray for his victims, this guy. He was a very fine chap. But Ball didn't go that far. But he didn't boast of getting any of them that he—he did a job and did a good job.

00:08:11

[Military life and logistics, part one]

EAV: Well, General, getting back to your flight training. You were given orders from your squadron to take flight training—or pilot training?

FL: Well, when we finished—when my time came, Price [Stephen Price]—I'd like to get this thought over to you, Gene. It's hard to tell anyone how the things that happened to us in the space of time I was there of 1916—it wasn't just one day or two days. It was every day. Every day. Sometimes seven hours and a half in the air. Say, four hours and then three-and-a-half later. You used to catch two shows a day—as much as two shows a day when things were tough. The Somme show, when the tanks—now, that—we flew escort, top escort, over there when they brought the tanks across. It was my duty, supposedly, as—at that time I got to be, which was top observer of the outfit. In other words, the first thing that I had happened to me, I was appointed, a gunnery officer of the squadron. I'm still a second lieutenant, but I've got colonels and majors under me because, as I tell you—or told you—they applied for all kinds of officers, and they had colonels and majors come to the Flying Corps who ranked as only as second lieutenants.

In other words, they didn't rank as anything when they come in on probation. After a month, if they got recommended—if they *were* recommended, rather, by our squadron commander, they would then become a second lieutenant in the Flying Corps, although they retained their rank in their old unit of the Canadians or whatever, Australians or whatever they were, as colonel or whatever it is. And I was made gunnery officer right away, on the count of, possibly, my ability to shoot and the buttstock, which I perfected or designed. And now, that isn't—the reason I, bringing up the buttstock, that was self-preservation, boy. I was trying to save Fred Libby. That's what I was after. But it did turn out to help everybody because it—you could readily see that you can hold a gun firm,

you get your shoulder against it, and when you're waving around in the air with a midday breeze and nothing to hang onto, you've got one hand free to hang on with and your shoulder against the other, you can do a much better job.

00:10:42

[Pilot training in England and meeting King George IV]

FL: Now, when we got through with all this flying and going through this whole summer of the Somme show and the spring and into the fall, in October—I think the 1st of October or 2nd or 3rd—Price was sent back to England for a rest period. Now, we were the only two left in the 11 Squadron. The squadron had changed twice completely in September in personnel. That's officer and that's pilots and observers. I mean, there was 36 and it was our full staff, and they're either killed, wounded, or prisoners of war. So our turnover was fast. So Price had enough and I had had enough flying for a while because we were both a little jittery. They returned Price. Now, he was already a pilot, but he was sent back for leave, to do nothing. Well, naturally, I had been recommended to go back to get my pilot's wings, but I didn't go back as soon as he did for some reason. I was kept there as an observer until the last part of October, just maybe three weeks later. Then I returned to England.

Well, when I returned to England, I was given leave until January the 1st. I had all of November and December to do nothing, to go anywhere I wanted to and do anything I wanted to do for free. And then I was to go to school down—the schooling that I should have had when I first became an observer. I went down—was sent down to Wantage—that's Reading, England—where there is a civilian school. And Wantage Hall, they turned that into a training school for observers and future pilots. It was a ground course, the first place they were to go. They were given their commission, and they were sent there to learn what I already had learned the hard way. So I was to have 60 days training down there, which was just like a vacation. But I had 60 days free to do nothing up until January.

Well, during that January, that period of time there, when I got back, why, I met this Raymond B. Price, this American, the vice president of the United States Rubber Company. And Price had got the news that we were to be decorated at Buckingham Palace on December the 13, 1916, which the both of us were. And then—oh, I got awful tired. Oh, after December, I—there was nothing but play. There was no—get up, go to lunch, wait for the pubs to open in the evening, and some more play and wait until the shows are out in the night and then some more play till morning. And I was getting anxious to get back to the flying game again.

EAV: You were decorated in December—

FL: December the 13th, 1916 at Buckingham Palace.

EAV: Who made the decorations, sir?

FL: The King himself. George the Fourth. King George the Fourth.

EAV: You and—

FL: And we had been previously—we had met him in England—I mean, in France. We flew escort for him for four days when he was on his trip over in France. Price and our squadron.

And it was a very monotonous deal. It was well back of the lines. We were at least 15 miles back of the lines, and all we did is go up to 10,000 and beetle back and forth. That was to keep any Hun that should get wind or anything from beetling over. I never did—we never had saw one and anything of the kind. But on the fifth day, we were told to [unintelligible] in our best uniform, [unintelligible] stand in front of our ships out in our hangar. He didn't tell us who was coming or anything else. All of a sudden, around the corner came His Majesty and his assistants and all the fellows. He shook hands with all of us and thanked us for our service. And he was a very wonderful fellow.

And then when we were decorated by King George the Fourth at Buckingham Palace, [unintelligible], we knew—this decoration was given to us earlier than this, of course. We were notified at our mess—11 Squadron mess one night by Major Hubbard. And Price and I, we were the only two in the squadron all through the summer now, mind you. Believe it or not, they got a decoration. All that hard fighting that we went through. We were the only two that lived long enough to get one.

EAV: Did the King make any mention of you being an American receiving—

FL: Oh, yes. He shook hands with me and thanked me for my service, and he was very wonderful. I was very fond to meet him. There was another thing about him that I had a [unintelligible] was keeping him well. His health, for instance.

You see, the British have a very strict rule. You, every week on Thursday at your mess, you have to drink to His Majesty's health. And they furnish so much money that's deposited at Cox and Co. You never draw any money like we do over here. You never see any money. Your money is deposited—everything, your allowances and everything—is deposited at Cox and Co. Bank for our—that was the Royal Flying Corps' bank. And they give you so much for drinking to His Majesty's health. Well, I went a little overboard on that. I went a little over—outside and helped a little on my own in between times, sir. And he never was sick a day while I was over there. [laughter] I mean, I think—I wanted to tell him the couple times I met him, but I didn't have the heart.

[unintelligible] it was a question of who was doing who the most good, whether I was helping him a lot or myself. So I—but anyway, he was a fine chap.

00:17:03

[Military life and logistics, part two]

EAV: Captain, before we leave your observer's day, could you tell me if you had—well, what was the typical duty day?

FL: Well, the typical duties of the day was—

EAV: Up at sun-up?

FL: It depends. Before you go to bed nights, you would look at the bulletin board, and it sometimes would be 9:00 where that would be there. But we hadn't finished dinner usually by that time—or 9:00 or 9:30. Because, you see, we had a—the British maintained a very wonderful mess, Gene. Right back of the lines, you sit down to a nice, eight-course dinner there with everything. Soup to nuts, right—all of it. We had a caterer from the Savoy Hotel to take care of us. You know, he had enlisted and bing, there he was. We had the best of everything. And we had a—not only the allowance that the British give you, but we had an officers' fund. Everybody put in so much dough. We had all the fine stuff—everything. The drinks of all kind. And every month, you'd put in so much, and we had an officer of the mess who handled the money. And we'd finish dinner about 9:30, sometimes 10:00.

Then you'd look at the orderly board and see what the score was. If you were up for the early morning show, that was just as the dawn was barely breaking. And over here, I think they called it the dawn patrol. I never heard that word in my life over there, but it was the early morning show. If you caught that, then you'd catch another one in the afternoon. You'd catch two shows that day. The next—if you caught the noon one, you would only do that one show. You'd do four hours, roughly, on that noon show, unless there was something extra happening, then you might catch the dickens.

But then the other show, the third one—the third flight would catch the afternoon. In other words, he'd leave about 4:00. I mean, maybe 3:30. Depends on what the—and then these [unintelligible] might be for an offensive patrol. Might be to go over and hunt—sit on a Hun airdrome up there and wait for the guy to come up for a battle. Pure and simple battle, nothing else. Brother, you always got them. Now, they always come up to them. You didn't have to wait too long, either. They'd come up there, and the fight was on. Well, those didn't last too long as a rule because you—your ammunition began to get low, and if you get your Heinie or two, you're on your way home. And if you get hit or

you're not—you know, you're not knocked out of commission, you've got enough to go home, you go home sooner than your time. You're on your own after you get over there in that kind of a deal. You go over in a formation, but it's usually always split up and then you stagger home. And those were really bad.

00:19:49

[*Reconnaissance mission to Valenciennes, France*]

FL: Then they have a reconnaissance show. You might be on a reconnaissance back there to take pictures of some particular place. I remember the last show that Price did with me. It was a tough show. Well, now, Major—the major had orders in the squadron headquarters for Price to return the next day to England. And still, Price was ordered to do this stunt. And it probably was because he was the coolest and the stoutest and, naturally, was the senior pilot. And being the senior pilot, I was his observer, naturally, and I was to tag along to go back to Valenciennes and take photographs. Now, the main thing they wanted these pictures for—something was going on. And that was the furthest that an F.E.2b had ever been.

EAV: This is just one plane making this show?

FL: No, no. Our flight. The six of us. But Price was leading the show. And it was a—as I say, we couldn't have any scouts. They couldn't make it back. They didn't have enough petrol. But they were to pick us up on the way back. But we were to go over there and, regardless of everything, we were to stay out of any fights that we could and get back with the pictures, was the main thing of the whole deal.

Well, of course, it was a—we had both had a lot of flying. We weren't really happy any—[unintelligible]. And the sad part of it is, all our pilots and observers were—except for one man. We had one captain flying second escort that—Captain Adams, who had had considerable flying. But the rest were all more-or-less green. Now, this is quite a trip for them. So in place of rendezvousing at 10,000, like we used to often do over our own airdrome, Price gave orders to rendezvous at 3,000 and get our heights climbing towards the trenches to save petrol so we'd have enough to get us over there and back. Because it was nip and tuck. And always with the wind coming against us when you turn for home. But we hit an awful lot of clouds, and we climbed through the clouds up above them. And of course, the Heinie couldn't see us. They could hear us. They knew where we were going. And it was all duck soup. It was beautiful up there. The sun and everything up above those clouds, Gene.

EAV: What time of the day was this?

FL: Oh, this was around morning. It was around—we left about 10:00, I would say.

EAV: What was the average heading of that flight? Do you recall, sir?

FL: What was the what?

EAV: The heading? The magnetic heading? Roughly.

FL: Which direction?

EAV: Yes, sir.

FL: Well, you say—you know, they say that you go west. You're always going east when you go to Hun Land. I don't know where that expression "He went west" came from. They always say when a man is shot down, "He went west." As a matter of fact, when he was shot down, he was over east because it was always east into Hun Land. But they always called it west. Now, we would be going directly east to Valenciennes from where we were. That is exactly the direction. Only, if you were killed over there, you had gone west, regardless.

But Valenciennes was a railroad center. And some pictures or something they wanted very badly back there. Well, over by these clouds, we figured everything was safe. We got up about 11,000 feet. But we got a break when we got to Valenciennes that broke wide open. We got beautiful pictures, and we did our job and had no interference from anybody. It looked like a nice, kosher deal.

But in coming back, why, the clouds began to drift and they split-up. And the wind was blowing against us the wrong direction. So Price kept his nose down a little bit to keep up speed because to get back you'd have to, which was costing us priceless petrol. But we drifted along. But I could see—when we got about halfway back toward our lines, I could see in the distance some of our scouts, which was a welcome sight, believe me. Now, we're down. We're coming back to the right, coming toward our airdrome. We're coming to the right of Bapaume, which was on the German side. But I could see down there, also, some of the Germans. And in the meantime, I could see them off to the right. I could see them coming up from every direction. They had a lot of time to get up off the ground with their scouts and catch this F.E.2b, which was never a fast ship to start with. In those days, it was as slow as could be. But naturally, with a buck in the wind, why, the Germans had all the leeway to get in between us, of which they did.

But anyway, our scouts got there. We lost one ship—burnt, fire—with the first attack that we got. And two of our observers got two of the boys, picked off two of their ships. And I didn't get any at all with my first shot. But the scouts began to pull in and the second—
[phone rings].

[recording stops and starts again]

00:25:14

[Thoughts on aircraft markings, guns, and the RAF F.E.2b]

EAV: Captain, may I ask you, sir, what particular squadron markings did your aircraft have?

FL: Well, really, we didn't have any particular marking, except the British ring, the insignia.

EAV: Yes, sir.

FL: But we had no side markings or anything printed on there as—Indian heads or what have you. We didn't have time. And our ships usually were out of circulation very quick. They were either shot so badly that they had to be replaced with new ships or the thing was just impossible—the length in time that they were in use, as far as we were concerned as an observer and pilot, that you couldn't decide on any one insignia.

EAV: Well, Captain, I'd like to go back now in your statement that—where you babied your guns and worked with your guns. If you brought back a plane that was shot up, with the guns that you had taken care of, did you take your guns off this ship and put them on a new ship that you were assigned?

FL: The guns were always—you know—the main thing of all the flying with us in the early days with the observers were our guns. They were the saviors of the whole deal.

EAV: Yes, sir. Your life.

FL: And we had—that's right. Our life. And the life of the pilot. Now, Gene, I'll tell you one thing. The pilot's life in the days with the two-seater in 1916 depended 100% on the observer.

EAV: Oh, I can imagine.

FL: I mean, he did all the shooting, and the observer—I mean, the pilot deserved a world of credit because to sit there and take what he had dished out, he depended altogether on someone that could shoot. Now, it's quite—one thing that I'm going to say. A pilot who went over there with an observer to protect him, I can't think too much or say too much about the boy. He deserved everything.

EAV: Yes, sir.

FL: Now, in the F.E.2b, which the pilot did all the flying, naturally, and the observer had the two guns, it was impossible to have any—as I said before—any insignia or anything on

them that would designate those ships because they didn't last that long. They were either shot so badly that an insignia was not—would be obvious.

EAV: Captain, the aircraft, were they camouflaged in any manner? I noticed the picture that we have. It just looked like it was white—

FL: Well, I'll tell why they—for instance, that wing particularly that you're looking at, Gene, is an extra wing that—repaired on that ship. It's a wing that was completely shot away—the original that matched the color of the other part of the ship. And that is a fill-in. That wing there is good. It's a perfect wing, only it is fit in to take the place of the wing that had been shot to pieces.

EAV: So the normal aircraft was just white or neutral color?

FL: The normal aircraft was a white ship. Just purely a neutral color. And I might mention something to you about those ships that is interesting, the F.E.2b.

EAV: Yes, sir.

FL: In the early days—in '16, all those ships were donated to the British Empire by, say, the Rajah or the Sultan Akida.

EAV: Is that so?

FL: All Indian princes or what have you. And nearly all of them had the name—you say “insignias.” We had an insignia. We could have—we had names often on the nacelle—that is, the front part of the ship—like, say, “Punjab.” That ship there is Punjab the Second. I don't know whether you can see it or not. Punjab the First is over somewhere in Hun Land. But that is Punjab the Second. P-U-N-J-A-B.

EAV: Yes, sir.

FL: And the Sultan Akida and the Rajah and all the different names are of princes or potentate who came from India who completely furnished those ships. When one disappeared, it was another come up, and they were all paid for by the Indian boys who were on strictly for England 100%.

00:29:43

[Status as an American in the Royal Flying Corps]

EAV: Captain, tell me. Were you the first Yank in combat with the RAF?

FL: Oh, absolutely. The RFC.

EAV: Or RFC, excuse me.

FL: There is no—I don't think—I think you will look and you will find that there is no one that was over there in the days when I was there with the RFC in 1916, the spring. I'm absolutely sure of this, and I am also certain that there is no American on record anywhere that went through 1916 from the start right through like I did, and then took his pilot's license in '17.

EAV: And they also doubt if there's any that has the—that would have the Military Cross.

FL: Well, I mean, there are boys—now, I'll tell you, Gene. In your letter, which I showed you, I really want to ask that question. I read it for a reason. But they didn't answer it—there *are* Military Crosses issued after '17 to Americans. But between '16 and '17, I would say there were no Military Crosses issued to any [unintelligible].

EAV: That's wonderful, Captain. Incidentally, Captain, did you get any friendly, oh, kidding, jiving about the Yank—a little Yank and—

FL: I would like to say this to you right quick. The only kidding I had, they were all amazed that I was over there. And they all treated me so good. I could write a book about the way the English treated me, from '16 on through, after I got into this thing.

EAV: You probably built a legend.

FL: And they were just—well, I mean, it's just fantastic, the treatment that I had from the—every time—if I went on leave and the officer wasn't going on leave, he insisted I go call on his family or phone them and go down there and stay. I mean, they made no exceptions. And the same thing happened to the boys that were in the Irish service, believe it or not. That's quite a story, too. But the thing that I'm thinking about, they were so wonderful, so—they felt the [unintelligible] Americans, but where the real kidding come on was after we got into the war. They'd say, "How did you get here so quick?" You know, they've known me all—"Where have you been? What have you been doing?" You know, I really got a lot of kidding after we already got—

EAV: But, of course, you proved that an American could cut the mustard—

00:32:04

[END OF INTERVIEW]