

Oral history interview with John Coulston

Summary

John B. Coulston was a liberator of the Ohrdruf concentration camp. He grew up in Montclair, New Jersey. In September 1939, he joined the Horse Cavalry, Essex Troop, of the New Jersey National Guard. He was called to active duty in January 1941 and was sent to Officer Candidate School. Upon graduation in March 1942, he was sent to the 602 Tank Destroyer Battalion. Most draftees in his unit, in 1941, came from the Garment District in NYC. They were sent to France after D-Day, at the end of August 1944. He participated in the tank battle of September-October in the Alsace Lorraine region, as well as the Battle of the Bulge fighting their way to the Rhine and crossing it at the end of March 1945. On April 1, 1945, General Bradley ordered the army to proceed to Ohrdruf. His unit was attached to the 4th Armored and 89th Infantry Division that was in the vanguard. They liberated Ohrdruf on April 4, liberating 4 or 8 people, the rest were dead or were marched out. He saw four but heard of others. The guards who were left behind were killing the last of the survivors still there. They met there Leo Laufer, survivor, who later stated that the rest of the people were marched away and killed. Leo spoke at an event for survivors of the Lodz ghetto. On May 6, they went into other camps, though John does not know their names. In one they were the first friendly forces the people had seen. In one camp, three or four people came out of the huts; one approximately 50-year-old Russian or Polish woman gave him a faded tulip. Later, Rina (or Rita) Kaufman, a survivor, told him about the symbolism of the tulip as an affirmation of life. Pvt 1st Class Saul Tannenbaum of Fairlawn, New Jersey, a Jewish soldier in another company, who spoke Yiddish, was called to speak to the survivors. Through him survivors understood that they had been liberated. John now lives in Convent Station, New Jersey.