

All right. Today is Friday, 28 February, 2014. I'm Stephen Mise at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC interviewing Frank Towers, who is in Florida. We are interviewing him by telephone. Mr. Towers, can you tell me when you were born and where?

Yeah, I was born in Boston, Mass, June 13, 1917.

Did you grow up in Boston?

Well, I grew up there until I was 10 years old. And at that time, my father's business moved to Vermont. And of course, I finished my education there in St. Johnsbury, Vermont. And I graduated from high school in 1935 and went to the University of Vermont. And in 1940, I got into the military service and stayed for 10 years.

OK, let's back up a wee bit. What sort of business was your father in?

He was a machinist. And his company moved to Vermont for, I guess, tax purposes.

I see. And did you enjoy it there in Vermont?

Yeah, growing up there, I enjoyed it better than I did in Boston.

I see.

Yeah.

What was the name of the high school that you went to?

It was St. Johnsbury Academy.

OK. Was that an all boys school or was it coed?

It was coed.

OK. Yeah, it was a sort of a semi-private school. It was a school founded by the Fairbanks family. And it was the only high school in town. Every student in town was entitled to go to that school and get a good education.

And did you enjoy it there? Did you participate in any sort of extracurricular activities?

No. This was during the Depression years in the '30s-- '35. And I had to work to actually pay my way-- buy my books and pay my way through high school. So I didn't have much time to be involved in outside activities.

How did you do that? What sort of work did you do while in school?

Well, I was a stock boy in a store for a while and worked for a company, Standard Brands, as a stock clerk there. And that's about all that I did in the way of work.

Right.

Yeah.

And did you have any friends there? Did you meet your wife in high school, for instance?

Oh, no, no. I had a lot of friends. Of course, when I left Vermont in 1940, I came down here to Florida-- to Camp Blanding, Florida and spent a year training here. And during that time, I met this young lady that eventually, three years

later, we married. And we've been hanging around together ever since.

I see.

Yeah.

And what made you decide to go to the University of Vermont? Had you set your sights on that from go?

I was in business administration.

OK.

Yeah.

You graduated in 1940?

Right.

Tell us about your decision to go into the military. Were you drafted or did you volunteer?

I volunteered. At that time, I was out of work, looking for a job, and employers were very hesitant about hiring young men who had not had their military service, because the draft system had just kicked in a short time before that. And they did not want to train new employees for two, three, six months and then lose them to the military.

Right.

So they declined employing young men who had not had their military training. So I decided to get my year's training over with and come back and then be able to get a job.

And exactly what were the circumstances of that? And where I'm going with this is, did you seek a commission or did you enlist? And how did you come about your commission?

To get my commission?

Yes.

OK. I got into the local Company K of the National Guard in Burlington. And we came down here to Camp Blanding and trained here for a year. And we're getting ready to go home back to Vermont, and the Japanese dropped the bomb at Pearl Harbor. So we were in for the duration.

Right.

And there was no going back to Vermont at that time. So the unit that I was with, the 43rd division, was then prioritized to go to the Pacific and start fighting the war down there. And at that time, I was chosen to go to Fort Benning to go to officer candidate school. And I spent three months there training and became a second lieutenant, my commission there.

What rank had you attained in the enlisted ranks?

They gave me a second lieutenant.

Yes, but just before becoming a second lieutenant, what rank had you attained in the ranks?

I had risen up through corporal and sergeant. I was a sergeant when I went to Fort Benning.

You said you went in 1940-- were you conscious of the fact of what was going on in Europe? And did you see a likelihood of the United States entering the war?

No. At that time, I did not. I could see the clouds of war in Europe, but it was still far away. And I really didn't see the United States getting involved in the war at that time. It was not until later on-- '42, '43, that I began to see that, hey, we're going to get involved in this thing.

And tell us about your experiences at officer candidate school. What was that like?

Well, it was rather difficult, because I had been working with a supply officer in the 43rd Division, and I did not get the full extent of the basic training of the infantrymen that all the rest of the guys got. And so when I went to Benning, I was at a disadvantage that I had not had that basic training, and I was competing with other sergeants who had had the basic training. So I really had to do my military basic training at Fort Benning during the offer candidate course.

OK. And how did you fare there? How did you do in the end?

Well, in the end, I did well. And likely, I got my commission.

Very good.

If I hadn't got my commission, I'd have gone back in rank to my original unit.

Sure. Sure.

You said when the Japanese did attack Pearl Harbor, that's when you realized America, they were in it.

That's correct.

Tell us your attitude about that. What was that experience like? When did you hear about the attack on Pearl Harbor? How did it affect you? What was your feelings?

Well, I felt that this was going to get us into the war, because the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor. But the Japanese were tied in with the Germans as the Axis powers. And that, in turn, was going to draw us into the war.

I see. Then I felt confident at that time that, hey, we're going to go over to Europe or to the Pacific and fight these guys, and we're going to get this thing over with in maybe two or three months. That was a little optimistic.

Indeed. So when was the decision made to send you to Europe?

I'm sorry, give me that again.

When did you go to Europe?

OK. When I left Fort Benning, I went to Camp Wheeler, Georgia, and remained there as a training instructor for 14 months. At that time, we had invaded North Africa. So we became involved in the European scene at that time.

At the end of that 14 months, I got transferred then either the 30th Infantry Division, which was at Camp Forrest, Tennessee, finishing up their summer maneuvers there. And they went to Camp Atterbury in Indiana. And I joined them there the 1st of November of '43. And they were prioritized to go to Europe, although we didn't know that at the moment.

We didn't know where we were going to go, but we were doing our immunizations and the final firing and familiarization with weapons and getting prepared for combat somewhere. And we left Camp Atterbury the 1st of February of '44. And not knowing where we were going, we got on the train and we ended up at Boston. And it was

only then that we realized that we would be going to the European theater.

And how were you sent there? I assume you were shipped out by ship.

Yeah, we shipped out from Boston on the 12th of February on the SS Argentina. And we joined a convoy just outside of Boston with some other ships that came from New York and Newport News, Virginia. And it was the largest convoy that ever crossed the ocean together.

And our ship landed in Glasgow, Scotland. And from there, we entrained down through London and to the South Coast of England to a town of Bognor Regis. And that's where we stayed for the next six months training for the invasion if and when it came.

Well, how was your crossing? Did you have a good crossing?

It was a relatively good crossing. We didn't encounter any enemy ships. We had all kinds of battleships, sub-chasers with us. And periodically, we could see them darting out on some sort of a mission. We just assumed that they were out chasing a sub somewhere.

But we had no problem in going across. The weather was fairly good. In the North Atlantic in the wintertime, it's never very good. But we didn't encounter any storms or anything. So we had a fair crossing.

Was that your first time out of the United States?

Well, I had been to Canada-- right you call that out of the United States. But the first time overseas, yes.

And you were in Britain for how many months again? I'm sorry.

Well, until June-- about five months.

Did you interact with the British?

I'm sorry?

Did you interact with the British?

We did somewhat, but not a great deal. I think you're probably referring to the British military. No, but the British civilians, we had more contact with them.

What did you think? What did you think of them? How did they treat you?

They treated us very well-- were very happy to see us come and help them, because they'd been there in war for four years already-- German bombing and that sort of thing. So they were very happy to see us come and help them out.

OK.

But we had a very good relationship with the British civilians.

Very good. And I just want to back up a little bit so we don't get too far ahead of ourselves. By this time-- and I'm referring to you being in Britain before being deployed to the continent, to combat that is-- by this time, you were married?

Yes, I was. I married in March of '43.

And you had met your wife at university?

No, here at Camp Blanding.

I see.

She was teaching in Jacksonville at that time, and I met her there in Jacksonville.

Tell us about how you met.

How did we meet?

Yes.

It's kind of a long story. The people in Jacksonville were very hospitable. And we being Yankee boys at Camp Blanding away from home, they thought it would be nice to invite the soldier boys from Camp Blanding to their various church and civic organizations where they put on dances and get together with the young people of the local area, Jacksonville.

And of course, we were macho guys. And we wanted to have our beer on Saturday night. And when we'd go to these dances or whatever function they were having, all they had was soft drinks. And we didn't go for that. So we declined a lot of these invitations.

And it got to the point where nobody was going on a voluntary basis. So the army decided, we can't disappoint these people. You're going to have to go, whether you want to or not.

Right.

So volunteer-- you, you, you, you, get your Class A uniform on, and you go. So I was one of those that volunteered to go. And I went to this dance one evening and met my wife. And we were attracted to each other, so we started up a letter communication. There was no email back in those days, so the only way we could get together was to write. And so we just worked up a nice the relationship.

And you recall the first time you saw her, the first time you laid eyes on her?

Yeah.

And what was that like? Did you think--

I'm sorry, I didn't get that question.

What did you think when you first saw her?

Well, I just thought she was a nice looking girl and that I'd be interested in coming back and seeing her again.

Sure. And so we started writing back and forth. I would go back to Jacksonville and visit with her and met her family. And well, actually, I left Camp Blanding and went to Fort Benning and went to Camp Wheeler and sort of picked up the writing communication again with her.

And I decided it was time that we got more serious. We did. And it was January 1 of '42, I invited her to come up to Camp Wheeler. And I gave her an engagement ring. And the following March, we were married there at Camp Wheeler.

It was a lovely way to start the new year.

Yeah, good way.

So let's go back to Britain, then. You're in the South of England. You're writing to your wife at that time as well.

Oh, yes.

What was it like being away from her?

Well, of course I missed her. But we were so busy working, training, that I didn't have much time to dwell on the fact that I'm away from home and I'm lonesome. I was, of course. I missed her. But we just had so many activities going on that we didn't have time to get homesick.

Sure. Had you had children by that time or not?

Sorry?

Did you have any children by that time?

No. No, we did not.

So when was it made clear to you that you were going to be sent into combat, that you were going to the continent? And when did that happen and where did you go?

Well, we were on the South Coast of England, and we could hear the planes, the Air Force, going over every night bombing somewhere over on the continent. And because everything was top secret, until actually, the 5th of June-- at the night of the 5th of June, we heard this tremendous roar of planes going, and that just continued on and on and on.

And we were not hearing any planes coming back. So they were making a wide circle, going over, bombing, and coming back. And it was just continuing on all night. And this was unusual, because normally, the planes would go out and we'd hear them coming back, and that was it.

Right.

So we knew that that was probably the beginning of the invasion. And it was, then, the next day, we read in the newspapers that the invasion had started. And right at that time, we were moved to the marshaling area near Southampton in preparation for the crossing.

Now, on D-day, the 1st and the 29th division were the assault troops to go across the channel and land on Omaha Beach. And our 30th division went in behind the 29th five days later.

So you entered the European combat theater at D-day plus 5?

Yeah, that's right. Yeah.

What was your position at the time of deployment?

I was a platoon leader in a heavy weapons company-- mortar platoon leader.

OK. What was your first experience of combat, sir?

I'm sorry?

What was your first experience of combat?

Well, it was different than what we expected. When we were in England, we were all gung ho-- the hell, we were going to go over there and tear those guys up and make sure of the situation, drive the Germans back into their own country.

And we had done some training with live ammunition, but it was all very closely guarded so that we would not have any casualties or accidents.

Once we got over to Europe, there was no safety regulations, and the bullets were flying around fast and furious. And we never knew when the silver bullet was going to hit us. It was an entirely different situation.

Do you remember the first time-- the very, very first time that either you received fire or you returned fire?

Yeah. It was on the 15th of June.

Where were you? Tell me about it.

Well, we landed on Omaha Beach-- and I can recall it very well, because this was on my birthday-- the 13th of June. OK. I'm just talking with my wife here.

Yeah, we landed on my birthday on the 13th of June and moved into what we call a bivouac area, because this area had been cleared out now by the 29th division-- about two to three miles inland. And so we stayed in this bivouac area overnight, and then the next day, we marched into this little village in [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH] which the 29th division the day before had taken but were driven back out of it.

And so it was our job then to get back into that town, clear it out, and continue on from there. And that was our first day of combat. And we were green. We just didn't realize the seriousness of what this whole thing was all about until the silver bullet hit some of our friends and they encountered mines, they were hit way artillery shrapnel.

And these guys were being hit, became casualties, and the medics had to take care of them as best they could. And then during the night and the next day, we had to get replacements in for those men that were casualties of that day.

As a platoon leader, how did that affect you?

Well, I was responsible for 50 men in my platoon. And everything I did, I had to consider the safety of those men to do the actions that we did in firing our mortars, locating positions that were the best suited for us, and to have protection as best we could.

And did you lose any men that day or in subsequent days?

That first day, no, I didn't lose any men. But in subsequent following days, I did lose some men.

That must have been extraordinarily difficult.

It was, because these were men that I had trained with back in the States and then through the period in England. And during that period of time, you become close to your men, and almost like family. And it hurts when you see a man get wounded or killed. And you feel partially responsible for it.

Although, it's not your fault. You feel that you've lost one of your boys. And it hurt.

You described it just now as being rather like a family. As a platoon leader, did you look at the men under your command, were they more like sons to you or more like brothers?

More like sons, because, as I mentioned, when I landed there, I was 27 years old on my birthday. And most of my men were 18, 19, 20-year-old-- like old kids.

Right.

So there was a little bit of a gap there. And I felt more or less they were my sons, that I had to take care of them.

Sure. What do you think of-- you said before going into combat, you had that attitude that you were going to go in and show these guys the what for.

We were going to tear them up, yeah.

Once you had that experience of close combat, what did you think about the Germans? Were they good soldiers?

Well, we found, we really learned that they were well-trained, well-disciplined soldiers. And they had weapons that were as good as or better than what we had. And the only way we gained the upper hand was the fact that we just had more men. We had more weapons, more tanks. And we just overpowered them by sheer numbers--

Yes.

Rather than technical better weapons. They had better weapons than we had.

Sure. But let's just talk about that a little bit more. How did you view them-- the Germans, that's to say the German soldiers-- how did you view them as soldiers?

Well, they were good-- most of them, the Wehrmacht-- were very good soldiers, well-disciplined. One of the big differences that we found is that they went strictly by the book. Whatever was in the training manuals, whatever their leaders told them to do, that's what they did-- nothing more.

OK.

The American soldiers, we adapted. We were told what to do and how to do it, but if that didn't work, then we had the liberty of doing something else that would work. And we had that flexibility, which the Germans did not have.

OK.

Now, as you're moving inland, moving deeper and deeper into France, at some point, you came into contact with Jews. Can you tell us about that first experience?

Came into contact with who?

Jews.

Jews?

Yes.

OK. We did not have any contact with Jews. Let me go back a little bit. Back in the early training days, occasionally we would hear or read in the newspapers about some Jews being tortured over in Europe-- slave laborers.

Mhmm.

And this periodically would appear, but we never paid much attention to it, because what we were hearing was that some Jew would escape from some camp-- we didn't know about Auschwitz or Dachau back in those days. We heard there were these camps where they were concentrating Jews and torturing them and using them as slave labor.

But the story that we would get was that a Jew escaped from a camp, went back to his hometown, and told the people about what was going on in this camp-- that the Jews were being tortured and used as slave labor. They did not believe him. The Jewish congregation in his town did not believe him, because, like us, we thought of the German people as being civilized human beings, intelligent people, and they would not do that to another segment of human beings.



So this went on. Periodically, we would read articles like this while we were in England. But when we got into France, we saw none of that. In fact, Jews didn't ever cross our mind. That was not why we were there.

Right.

We weren't there to liberate the Jews. We didn't know about that whole situation. We were there to drive the Germans out of the land which they had occupied illegally. So we were not concerned with Jews. And we never really saw any Jews, because the Germans had taken them all out of France back to Germany to use them as slave laborers. So as we proceeded on through Normandy, and northern France, and into Belgium, we never saw or had any contact with any Jews.

OK.

They were all gone.

Right.

So we continued on through Belgium and into Holland in the Battle of the Bulge during the winter of '44-'45, and then we captured the city of Aachen, which was the first city to fall in Germany. And up to that time, we had seen nor heard nothing about any Jews.

Then we continued on northward through Monchengladbach and [? Hanlon, ?] Detmold, and Brunswick. We crossed the Rhine River on the 24th of March. Now, up to that time, we had seen nor heard nothing about Jews. That was not in our-- anything that we cared about.

Sure. As you're fighting along and as you're moving through Belgium and the Netherlands and then into Germany, what have you, is the German resistance getting stiffer? Or did you sense as an officer that--

Oh no, it was getting much less. From the time we had our last major battle in France at the city of Mortain, and that was the beginning of what we call the rat race-- that they were moving back to Germany almost as fast as they could.

So as an officer, you could sense them in retreat?

I'm sorry?

You could sense them in retreat?

Oh, yes. Yeah.

So you crossed the Rhine. Let's go to that period of time, and you're pressing on.

Right. So we were just chasing them. They were doing what we call-- I forget what it is now-- sort of defensive action as they were retreating. And the major part of the German army were moving back eastward toward Germany. And they would leave a small segment of men behind to delay us-- just create delaying actions.

And that's all we did all the way across northern France and up into Belgium and Holland. And it was not until we got into Holland and the German border where they had the Siegfried line. That's where we had to stop, and, of course, they stopped as well.

The reason that we stopped there was that we had run across France, and Belgium, and Holland so fast, we had outrun our supply lines. Now, all of our supplies had to come to us from England, across the channel, into Omaha Beach, and by truck move them up daily to supply us with food, ammunition, clothing, replacements.

So it was kind of a slow process-- that we are moving faster than the supply lines could keep up with us. So by the time we got to the Holland and the Siegfried Line, we had left thousands of vehicles behind because we ran out of gasoline. We just dropped the vehicles off on the side of the road--

Sure.

And abandoned them, more or less. And so by the time we got to Holland, we were out of food. We were out of ammunition. We were out of gasoline. So we had to stop there nearly a month waiting for supplies to reach us and become resupplied with ammunition, food, replacement men before we could make a successful attack on the Siegfried Line, and once we got the momentum going, to keep on going.

When did that happen?

That was in about February of '45-- February of '45 that we crashed through the Siegfried Line. And we had enough momentum going that we just kept on going and got up to Monchengladbach and Vessel and crossed the Rhine River, which was the biggest major obstacle that we had at that time. So we continued on from crossing the Rhine River on the 24th of March and headed to Brunswick, which is in the northern part of Germany. Now, up to this time, we had not seen nor heard anything about Jews or concentration camps-- nothing.

Now, this should have been around April, was it not?

This was the 10th of April that we captured Brunswick.

OK.

Now, there was a concentration camp, Bergen-Belsen, which was a little bit north of Brunswick, but that was in the British zone.

Right.

So we had nothing to do with it.

OK.

But it was there, nevertheless. But we didn't even hear about it. We captured Brunswick, and then our next objective was Magdeburg, which was probably 75 to 100 miles further East. And we started moving from Brunswick on toward Magdeburg.

And we came to this town of Hillersleben where there was a large German airbase. We captured that. And there was a number of large barracks and a hospital.

OK.

And we thought nothing of it. We just captured that town and went on to the next town of Farsleben. As we were approaching this little village of Farsleben-- there were only probably 1,000 people at the most-- we met some soldiers who were walking along the side of the road westward. And they said that up in Farsleben, the Germans are preparing an ambush for you, and they are protecting a train load of people.

Well, we didn't understand exactly what they meant by a train load of people. So we had our reconnaissance unit, which was a few tanks and infantrymen on the tanks, to move forward to this town of Farsleben. They found no resistance in the town. They cleared it out.

And on the east side of the town, there was a little hill. And the tanks were still moving forward. And as they mounted the hill and looked down into the little valley on the other side, they saw a train sitting there with a bunch of people

milling around doing whatever they wanted to do, really.

OK. That should have been-- just to clarify where we are in time-- that should have been probably the 12th or 13th of April? Somewhere around there?

This was the 13th of April.

OK.

We had liberated Brunswick on the 10th, and I think we liberated Hillersleben on the 11th or 12th. And the next day, the 13th of April 1945, we saw the train. And not knowing exactly what it was, very cautiously we approached it. And in turn, they saw the tanks and recognized them as American tanks, and they came rushing forward to meet and greet us. Then we found through a few of these people who could speak a little bit of English, and one of our guys was a Jew, and he could speak a little bit of Hebrew.

OK.

Well, they began to communicate, and what they found was this train had about 2,500 people on it. And it had come from Bergen-Belsen. Well, what is Bergen-Belsen? We'd never heard of it. OK, they told us Bergen-Belsen was a concentration camp where they had about 50,000 Jews.

This was the first time-- the very first time-- that we had ever heard of a concentration camp of Jews. That's the first time that we had ever met any Jews.

How close did you personally get to that train? Were you right on top of it?

Well, I was not there the first day.

OK.

I was with another unit. And this was the 743rd tank battalion, which was a part of our unit.

Mhmm.

They were the lead reconnaissance group right up in the very front. They were the first ones to meet this group of people. And I didn't see them, actually, until the next day.

And when you did see them--

It was a horrible scene. Because they had just been liberated-- I need to go back just a minute now. On the 6th of April, the camp commander of Bergen-Belsen was aware that the British troops were approaching his camp, and he wanted to get the inmates of the camp out of there as quickly as he could so that they would not see the condition that these people were in.

So on the 4th, 5th, and 6th of April, they loaded up three different trains loaded with about 2,500 Jews and sent them eastward towards a town of Theresienstadt, which was another concentration camp. And that was going to be the final solution for these people.

So one of the trains actually did arrive at Theresienstadt, and the second train was captured by the Russian army. And this was the third train that had come from Bergen-Belsen. Now, it took six days for that train to come from Bergen-Belsen to Farsleben.

That train was made up of what they call cattle cars-- cattle wagons-- that are like our small freight trains. They were smaller than our normal freight trains. We had used this type of freight train in World War I, and we called them 40 and

eights. Noting that each car was capable of handling 40 men or eight horses. And that was the general mode of transportation back in World War I to move troops around by train.

OK.

So these are these cattle cars, as they call them-- 40 and eights-- which we had put 40 men in. They had 75 or 80 people in these cars. And they were locked in there. In the corner of the car, they had what we would normally term it like a five-gallon bucket. That was their sanitary facility.

And if you can imagine 75 or 80 people crammed into one of these small freight cars, and the guy over here in the corner needs to relieve himself, there is no way that he can get over to that bucket and relieve himself. So the only alternative he had was just to let it run down his legs. So this is the condition that we found these people in after six days of standing.

There was no way that they could sit or lay down. The only way they could get down on the floor was by exhaustion-- that they would just crumple and fall down to the floor. And they just had to stay there. And these were the conditions when we opened these cars up that we found these people stinking from their feces and urine-- six days of dirty, lice-infested. It was a horrible sight-- something that we could not believe that was happening.

How did you react when you saw them? And how did they react when they saw you as Americans?

Well, we reacted-- we didn't believe what we were seeing. We could communicate very vaguely, because of the language barrier, with these people. But to see and understand where they had come from, the conditions that they had for those six days on the train, it was just nauseating to smell these people.

We didn't dare to touch them, because we were afraid of getting lice on us, fleas, typhus, was a very rampant disease in those days. We didn't want to actually touch these people at all. They wanted to greet us and hug us and kiss us.

So we just had to rebel against them and not have any personal contact with them as much as we could. Now, we understood where they were coming from and the conditions that they had. They were hungry. They had only gotten one meal a day, which consisted of a big bucket of soup, as they called it, which was nothing but a pail of water with some potato peelings or turnip peelings in it. And they were very lucky if they got a few of the turnip peelings in their cup full of soup they got every day.

How were they clothed when you saw them?

Well, some of them were fairly well clothed. The Dutch people and a few of the others were being held, more or less, as hostages for exchange purposes with the Americans for some of the German prisoners that we were holding. So they were in fairly good condition, and clothing was fairly good. But for the most part, their clothes were very ragged.

They were not in the striped prison uniforms that you often see in the pictures. They were in their own civilian clothing, but they had worn these clothes for months and months and months without any possibility of repair. If they got a tear in the clothing, that was it-- too bad. And the shoes-- they were just worn out, basically. There was nothing left of their shoes, just the tops. And they were in a horrible condition as far as clothing was concerned, and hungry.

As best you could tell in the languages that they were speaking and when you were speaking and interacting with them, where were these people coming from? Were they primarily Germans, Dutch, French, Italians?

No, these prisoners were from Eastern countries-- Hungary, Poland, Romania, Ukraine. A number of them were from Holland, a few from France. They were of varied nationalities. And this made the communication with them more difficult, because they spoke so many different foreign languages that we understood nothing at all except that there was one girl in particular who was quite intelligent, and she was fluent in about six languages.

So she was the main interpreter for this group. And a few of the others, they had a little bit of what we called pigeon

English-- they had a word here and there that they could fling out. And we could understand what they were trying to say. It was mostly sign language.

But we felt sorry for them, because they were so hungry and they saw us in nice, clean uniforms smoking cigarettes and eating candy bars. They just went wild when we handed them a candy bar or a pack of cigarettes. And they were just fighting over them.

But the problem that we did not understand was that these people had not had any kind of food for months. They were on very, very limited rations. And we were eating high protein food. And as we'd give them a candy bar or chocolate or something that we had in our pocket, their bodies just could not assimilate this high protein food we had. And they would just gobble it down, and the sooner they did that, they would throw it up.

Mmhmm.

And by this time, we had gotten the medics in there, because so many of these people were sick and had medical problems that we had to have the medical battalion come in and administer care to them. They said, hey, don't give these guys any more food. And they took over from that point on to care for their feeding. And they took our rations and diluted them down with water.

And what were those? You're talking about the rations that, presumably, the medical court took over. What were those? Were those K rations?

Yeah, that they would take our K rations and C rations and water them down so that they were more easily assimilated by these people.

How long did it take to get the corpsmen and the medical personnel there? How long of a delay it was before the time you saw them?

It was a matter of hours.

I see.

Just a matter of hours, because they were located with our division headquarters, and that's where I was at the time that they were brought in there and administered the help to them. And this is where I got assigned a job of moving these people away from this point in Farsleben, because, actually, this was still a battle zone.

And we had American artillery falling in the area. We had German artillery falling in the area. So we didn't want to have any more casualties. So I was delegated, then, to round up transportation and take these people out of there back to this town of Hillersleben that we had liberated a couple of days before, where there were some barracks and a hospital.

So I rounded up about 60 or 70 vehicles and got them loaded up and got them out of the area back to Hillersleben. Of course, the medical corps went with them, and they put the sick people in the hospital. And the others went into the barracks.

But first of all, as soon as we brought them back to Hillersleben, they were so dirty and stinky and filthy that there was nothing that we could do to give them clean clothing. So we had to have them strip their clothing off, and the engineer battalion set up some shower points. And we started moving them through the showers-- the first shower that they had had in months and years.

And as soon as they got through the shower-- they were given towels and soap. They were so happy to get cleaned up a little bit. But even through the shower, they could not get rid of the lice that were infested in their hair and their pubic hairs. And so after they finished the shower, we dusted them with DDT.

Now, DDT is today a prohibited item because it is a carcinogenesis item. And it, by law, is prohibited for use. But at

that time, that was the best technology that we had to fight lice and fleas and any kind of insects that they might have.

Did it work?

It worked.

OK.

So then the German people were ordered to bring clothing to this point-- of course, they were re-clothed. And then the single people were put into the barracks, the married people were put into some of the private homes that were available. And at this point, I left them and I went back to my unit and continued on my job.

And we fought our way onto Magdeburg. And we had attacked and captured Magdeburg on the 18th of April. And as far as we were concerned, that was the end of the war. Because the Elbe River, which ran through Magdeburg, was the demarcation line between us and the Russians. We could not go beyond that line.

So we stopped fighting on the 18th of April and just sat there and waited for the Russians to come in front of us and move on into Berlin. But basically, that was the end of the war. And that was the first and only contact that we had ever had with any Jews, this group of the 2,500 on the train.

And in talking with some of them, we found out where they came from and that they had been incarcerated at Bergen-Belsen. And they told us a little bit of the story about their life in Bergen-Belsen and them being put on the train, and then we captured them.

Did they tell you about mass killing? Did they tell you about--

Well, no, because Bergen-Belsen was not a killing camp, you might say. It was a camp where they worked 12, 15 hours a day. And the working conditions were not good. The food was not good. Their living conditions were not good.

So they told us about their life there in Bergen-Belsen. Like I said, they didn't have a large crematorium or gas chambers or anything like that at Bergen-Belsen. It was just a slave labor camp. And part of it was an exchange camp, as I mentioned before, to exchange these people for German prisoners.

But they told us of the hardships that they had, the life that they had. The living conditions in the barracks there at Bergen-Belsen was very bad. They had bunks I think four-high, and three or four people had to sleep in one bunk. And the living conditions were very, very bad there at Bergen-Belsen.

So this was basically the first time that we ever heard of Jews, slave labor, crematoriums, gas chambers. We never heard of anything like that before, and we could hardly believe what they were telling us. And they got a lot of this information from some of the inmates who had come from Auschwitz and Dachau, were being overcrowded there, and they moved them into Bergen-Belsen.

And then those prisoners in turn were telling the others about what was going on in these other camps. That's how they knew what was going on there. And we were not trained as humanitarians. We were trained as soldiers.

And basically, when we saw this train, these Jews, the conditions that they were in, we really didn't know what to do. We did the best we could with what we had. Most was wrong by feeding them the food the way we did.

Did your understanding of what you were fighting for and why you were fighting change with that encounter?

Oh, as we were fighting across Europe, we weren't fighting to save any Jews. We didn't know about them. We were fighting to drive the Germans back out of these occupied countries-- to give these people in France, Belgium, and Holland, to give them their freedom and liberty back that they had had before 1940 when they were invaded by the Germans.

The Jewish situation was just literally a sideline that happened that we didn't know anything about it. We didn't know what was going on until we saw and then we believed.

And did that change your attitudes towards the Germans?

Well, at that point in time, it was too late, because here we are at the end of the war now. So from that point on, we didn't have much contact with the Germans.

Right.

The war was over. I think the 8th of May, so it was only about three weeks after we found this train that the war ended. We didn't have any good feelings toward the Germans, because they were denying everything. And we knew that they were lying-- that they were involved with it. They knew about it. They knew what was going on.

When did you hear that the war had ended? And how did you hear it?

I'm sorry?

When did you hear that the war was over, and how did you hear about it?

Well, we were in Magdeburg and basically just sitting there waiting for the Russians to go up in front of us, and I think we got the word through our higher channels, and it came down to us that the war had officially ended on the 8th of May. So as I say, we were in Magdeburg and liberated that on the 18th of April, and we could not cross the river to liberate anything more. We just had to sit there and wait for the Russians, because that was declared to be their territory.

So we had to sit there from the 18th of April I think until about the 25th or 26th of April before the Russians actually moved up in front of us and we met with them. So of course, we knew then the Russians were allocated that territory which included the city of Berlin. And as soon as they moved in front of us and on up to Berlin and captured it, that the war was going to be over very, very soon.

And did you meet with or interact with any of the Russians?

Yeah, we did.

What did you think of them?

They were stinking, dirty bastards. They were very arrogant.

Did you write any letters home to your wife about what you experienced with that train?

I really don't remember. I did write to her basically every day. I'm sure that I did. But very unfortunately, after I came home, she had piles of these letters that I had written to her-- she had saved all my letters. And she made a return letter, wrote to me every day, which I saved, and I would send them back to her-- bundles of them-- back to her, and she saved them.

So when I came home, we had boxes and boxes of these letters. And what are we going to do with this stuff? Well, we dumped it. That's the worst thing I ever did, I think. Because in those letters, I wrote to her in sort of a coded way-- where I was, what I was doing, because all of our mail was censored, because we're not allowed to tell where we were or what we were doing.

Sure.

But in a coded way, I could relate to her where I was or what I was doing. So all those things were in it-- and the men

that I had contact with from day to day, the things that I did from day to day. That was a historical document, and we just threw all of that away because, I know all that stuff. I can remember all those people. But now today, I can't remember those things.

Sure. When did you get word that you were going to be sent back to the States?

I'm sorry? Again.

When did you get word that you were going to be sent back to the States?

Oh. When we ended the war basically the 8th of May, we moved southward about 50 miles into an aerial occupation. And it was at that time, we were notified that the 3rd division was prioritized to come back to the States and have a 15-day leave and do some 30-day training and go to the Pacific and help finish the war in the Pacific.

So we were geared for. That and that was probably in July. So in early August, we started moving back through France and to England in preparation to return to the States. And while we were in England, they dropped the bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

And that, in effect, ended the war. And we felt right then and there that we may have to go to the Pacific, but there would not be any war to be fought as we had planned. So we came home and were given a 30-day leave. And during that time, the great white fathers in Washington were mulling over, what are we going to do with all these guys now?

We don't need them anymore. The war in the Pacific is over. So they said the telegrams to everybody telling them to report to their nearest military installation for further orders, which they did, and then most of them got their discharge. And that ended their military service.

But you stayed on.

I stayed on. We had the opportunity to volunteer to stay in service or take a discharge. And I volunteered to stay in service. And so I reported back to the 3rd Division, which then was headquartered at Fort Jackson in South Carolina. So I remained there for about six months.

I was company commander of the 5th Corps headquarters company. And at the end of that six months, we were given the opportunity to go to another station in the occupation duty. And we were given the opportunity like the Caribbean, Panama area, Hawaii, and a few other places-- plus Japan and Europe.

Well, of course, Japan and Europe were at the bottom of my list. Naturally, the Hawaii or the Caribbean were at the top of the list. That's what I chose. What did I get? I got orders to go back to Europe. So I went back to Europe and was stationed in Frankfurt, Germany, and remained there for three years.

During that time, after I was over there for about four or five months, dependents were allowed to come over and join us. So my wife came to Frankfurt, and we lived there. And that's where we had our family.

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

I'm sorry?

Let's back up just for a little bit in terms of returning to the United States.

Yeah.

Do you recall the first time that you saw your wife again?

Oh yeah. Going back to the time we left England, we came home on the Queen Mary, come into New York, and went to



Camp Kilmer in New Jersey. And that's where we were given our leave. So I took the train and went to Boston. I'll say during the time that I was in Europe, my wife stayed with my mother in Boston, although her home was in Florida. She chose to stay with my mother during that time.

So when I get home, of course, the train took me into Boston, and I got a cab to take me to my home. And it was a pretty emotional reunion. Of course, I had sent a telegram to them and telephone call telling them that I was coming, so they were aware that I was going to be there.

And what was that day like? Do you remember it? Tell me about it?

Well, I can't really remember that very well. But I know it was very emotional. You know, I had not seen my wife in 11 months. And to be alive and back with her again, it was a very, very pleasant reunion. Of course, my mother was there too.

And to be alive was the main thing. We never knew through the war when the silver bullet was going to hit us and that would be the end. But I was very fortunate that I dodged the bullet.

So let's go back to Frankfurt. Your wife has joined you. You're there, you're starting a family. What was that whole experience like? Were your children born there in Germany?

Yes. She came over in, let me see, in the fall of '46. And we were given the preference of having a house there in Frankfurt. And eight months later, she delivered twins in the 97th General Hospital. That was the beginning of our family.

And then exactly one year later, we had a son born also in the 97th General Hospital. Now, although they were born in Frankfurt, Germany, I being an American citizen and she also, they were registered with the United States embassy there, and they are actually American citizens, although they were born in Germany.

And did you stay long enough for them to go to school there?

No, no. No. The girls were two years old, and the son was one-year-old. And it was then that we made a decision to terminate-- my contract was coming to an end, and we decided to terminate the contract and come back to the States. So in 49, we came back to the States.

And where did you settle and what did you do?

Well, we came back to Boston and lived there for a few months. And then we were down to Florida to live with her parents for a few months. And we decided that Florida was a better location, because we had just lived in Boston through a winter, and it was very cold. And I got tired of shoveling snow, so we decided to settle in Florida.

What did you do in Florida?

I went back to school for a while and studied computer work. And I got a job there at the University of Florida as an office manager in the computing center that they had at the university at that time.

And you've been in Florida ever since?

Yeah, been here ever since. Yeah, we built our house here in 1950, and I've been right here ever since.

Now, that experience with those people on that train, that really wasn't the end of it for you, was it?

No. I never gave it much thought until I guess in the '80s-- we were cleaning out some junk in somewhere, --holdings-- and I came across a little notebook that I had kept a sort of diary in. And I had a lot of information about this encounter with that train.

And I just stopped to think about those days and those people. And I thought that that would be a good historical document. And so I took all the notes that I had in those notebooks and kind of put them together in a handwritten document. This was before the days of computers, really.

But a little later, when I got to get to the university, get involved with computers, I started transferring all that stuff into my computer. Well, I had this document there and still did nothing with it-- just a document for future historical purposes. So it was not until 2005 that I had the opportunity to go back to Magdeburg, Germany.

Now, this is a little story in itself. A few years before this, I had had communication with a young girl in Magdeburg who was working at the University of Magdeburg on her thesis, which was on the liberation of Magdeburg. Now, when we left Magdeburg in May of 1945, this became a part of the Russian zone.

The Russians moved into Magdeburg, and they purged everything that was in the libraries and schools archives, any documents that were in English, and anything that was related to the liberation of Magdeburg. They instilled in the people of Magdeburg that they were the liberators of Magdeburg. And for the next 40 years, that was the belief that the people of Magdeburg were brought up in.

So the young girl working on her thesis of the liberation of Magdeburg writing to me, indicated that the Russians claim that they had liberated Magdeburg, but a friend of hers had a book which said something about the Americans had liberated Magdeburg. What is the truth? Now, she had found my name in the computer. I'm not sure just how she found it, but she found my name connected with the 30th Division.

And so she was asking this question-- did the Americans really liberate Magdeburg? Well, I sent her back copies of pages from some of our history books and from my own personal knowledge about the liberation of Magdeburg on the 16th of April, 1945. She put this all together and wrote up her thesis, and she did get her PhD.

But she took that document to the mayor of Magdeburg. And he was rather surprised to know that the Americans actually had liberated Magdeburg. He was always under the impression that the Russians had liberated Magdeburg. Now, we're coming up on April of 2005, which then was going to be the 40th or 50th anniversary of the liberation.

This just happened to coincide with the 1,200th anniversary of the founding of the city of Magdeburg. So they were planning to have a big celebration on the anniversary of the founding of Magdeburg as well as the liberation of Magdeburg. Well, in doing so, and unknown to me at the time, they invited a man who had been in a slave labor camp there in Magdeburg.

Now, in Magdeburg, there was a Polte Ammunition Works, which was making ammunition for the German war machine. And this was operated by slave laborers-- Jewish slave laborers-- which had come from Buchenwald. And we, the 30th Division, had actually liberated this slave labor camp, and that was just a matter a few days after we had liberated the Farsleben group.

Anyway, the mayor, through another person, invited this man, this Jew, who had been a slave laborer in Magdeburg in the Polte Ammunition Works to come back to Magdeburg to tell the people about his incarceration. At the same time, he invited me to come to Magdeburg to tell the people about the actual liberation by the Americans.

So for the first time, when I got to Magdeburg, I met this man, a Jew that I had liberated in 1945. So we worked up a nice relationship. And I found that he lived in Boca Raton, Florida, about three hours away from where I lived. So this is a fascinating thing that I, a liberator, and he, a Jewish slave labor, should end up living so close together here in Florida.

And have you been in communication with him since?

I was. Sorry-- he just died about a month ago. Anyway, after we came back from Magdeburg, he sent me an email and said, Frank, look at this website. It is tremendous. And I opened up that website, and it was a website created by a history teacher up in Hudson Falls, New York.

And it was about a tank commander of the 743rd tank battalion having liberated a train in Magdeburg. Well, I read the whole story through, and it was exactly the story that I have related to you. And how did this guy get this story? So I got in contact with the teacher to find out what his relationship was to this website, the story.

And it seems that he was a World War II history buff, but he was at the time concentrating on the Holocaust. And he gave his class a project to go out in the village and see if you can contact a veteran who had anything to do with his connection with the Holocaust.

The students brought their stories back in and read them, they discussed them. But this one boy had a very unique story-- that his grandfather was a tank commander in the 743rd tank battalion, and they had captured this train with 2,500 Jews on it. Well, that's exactly my story.

So I got together with this teacher, and we discussed his side of it. And I told him my connection with it. And so we've been sort of collaborating together ever since. At the time, he put a website out-- his story went out on the internet, and the first hit that he had on it was from a lady in Australia.

Now, she was a young girl on that train, and her family moved to Australia at that time. Of course, she'd been there ever since. And she saw that website, and she got back in contact with the teacher. And through that-- and then he had two or three other hits up around New York. So when I was discussing this matter with him, he had probably about 10 or 12 Jews that he had had contact with who were on that train.

Well, I said, I've got this story about the train, and I wanted to get involved in it. So I went on the internet and put my story out, and I started getting hits on it. And it just snowballed. And eventually, I got in contact with a person in Israel who had been a young boy-- he was orphaned and went to Israel-- or went to Palestine-- and was adopted by a family, was educated there in Tel Aviv, and he became a doctor-- a medical doctor--

Mmhmm.

And had practiced and had just retired when I first got in contact with him. He could not speak very good English. And it was very difficult for me to understand him. But his daughter was quite interesting. And she could speak much better English than he could, although he was kind of broken up.

So she became very interested in his story, because, as with many of these Jews, as they grew up, they wanted to forget the past. They wanted to forget about the Holocaust and not even talk about it to their families. So she was interested in it and she wanted to hear more about it, wanted to learn what her father had been through.

So I gave her the whole story as I could recall. And she became very much involved in it. And her father originally was from Budapest. He was Hungarian. And he remembered the names of some of the people. And she started researching there in Israel for some of these people, and she found a number of them.

So this increased our numbers of people who had survived this train. Now, going back just a bit-- on the train originally, there were about 2,500 people. And of them, there were about 600 children. Now, I'm saying children-- these are people 21 years of age and less.

OK.

Now, the Germans were quite meticulous about keeping records. When that train left Bergen-Belsen and we captured it there in Farsleben, the train commander had a list of all of the people that were on that train. That list contained their name, their birth date, and their birthplace-- and, of course, other data too that was not really relevant.

That document was taken and retained by what is now the Bergen-Belsen Memorial. And I got a copy of that list and went through it. And since it had the birth date of everybody that was on the train, I could determine who the children were. So I sorted out all the children-- 600 names.

And of those, I just assumed half of them were deceased because of malnutrition, age, and other causes. So we're down to about the possibility of 300-plus surviving children out there somewhere. So with this young lady in Israel doing some research and finding some of these people and some of my own research through the internet, I have found 235 of these people.

And I've been in contact with each one, either by mail or [AUDIO OUT]

Can you say that last part again? We had a little bit of audio difficulty. I lost you at, you were contacting them by email.

Either by email or snail mail.

OK. And how many did you contact?

And I've contacted 235.

And did most of them respond to you?

I'm sorry?

Did most of them respond to you?

Oh, yes. Yes. In fact, I'm in contact with them right now trying to get any kind of documents, copies of documents that they might have. Now, I need to go back here just a little bit. At the time of the liberation, these people I'm talking about today, they were all little young kids.

Sure.

21 years and less.

Mmhmm.

Those who were 10 years and younger, they really don't remember much.

OK. It's the group that's 10 to 21, they have a little memory of what was happening. Prior to the war, their parents could see the handwriting on the wall-- what was happening to the Jews. And they were starting to make arrangements to get out of Europe, to get away from Hitler and the program that he had to eliminate the Jews.

So many of them had obtained passports from various countries, wherever they would be accepted. Now, in those years, there was a great deal of anti-Semitism-- that the United States did not want these Jews. They had a very, very limited quota, and that's all they would take in here.

So these people got passports to South America countries, Australia, African countries, Canada, some got passports to the United States. So whatever place these people had a passport for, that's where they went. They scattered all over the world, because they were citizens of that country.

Sure.

And we at the time of the liberation offered transportation to them to whatever country they had a passport for. Now, just last night, I was talking with a lady in Australia by Skype. And she said she has just found two more girls or ladies there in Australia. So this is the way the thing has snowballed.

Yes.

So I got two more people that are going to start researching now in Australia. But we had a lot of them come here to the United States, but most of them are centered up around the New York area.

OK.

There's very few here in Florida. And there's a group up in Carolina and a few out in California-- they're just scattered all over. So two years ago, this young lady in Israel thought it'd be a nice idea to have a reunion of some of these people. So she sent word out to them, and I sent word out to the people here in the States about a reunion that they wanted to have in April. That was 2 and 1/2 years ago.

So we had this reunion in her town in Rehovot, which is between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. And we had 60 of the survivors plus their children and grandchildren-- total of about 500 people. And we assembled at the Weizmann Institute there in Rehovot. They have a large auditorium in which we met.

What was that like seeing them again, now as grown people who had made lives for themselves?

It was very emotional to meet these people that I had had a little hand in liberating 69 years ago. And they were very receptive and very thankful to me to be one of their liberators. And in fact, I had been the only liberator that they had ever met. And it was a very emotional meeting to be with these people, to physically see some of these people.

And the thing is, most of them had never met each other before, because they came to Israel staggered at different times by different routes and ended up in different places. Some went to Jerusalem, some went to Tel Aviv and all kibbutzes all over Israel-- or Palestine at that time.

Sure.

And so they'd really never had any contact with each other. And this was the first time they had contact with each other as well as me, as a liberator. Now, most of these survivors had never talked about the Holocaust to their families.

As they grew up, they just wanted to forget. They had bad memories there, and they just wanted to forget it. The day of their liberation, that was the beginning of a new life for them. Anything before that, they just wanted to forget about it-- not talk about it. Their children would ask them what happened-- I don't want to talk about it. Forget it, and would talk about something else.

And this has gone on for years until this reunion time. I told the story that I had more or less related to you here now to these children. And they are learning for the first time what had happened to their parents, a little bit about the Bergen-Belsen era, but mostly from the actual liberation period, which they knew nothing about. All they knew was what their parents had told them from the time they grew up in Israel or wherever they were up until the present time.

Sure.

So this was a whole new story for these children and grandchildren to learn about something about the liberation of their people. Now, one person in particular, a girl named Lily, she was from Warsaw. And she had lost both of her parents to Auschwitz. And as an orphan, she was being taken care of by various other women.

And she lived through Bergen-Belsen with them. And on the day of their liberation, the 13th of April, she said, that is my birthday. She did not know exactly where she was born, she did not know exactly when she was born, so she took that day of liberation, the 13th of April, 1945, as her birth date.

And she has considered that her birth date ever since. This is just one example of their feeling toward their liberation-- that they feel that that day of liberation was a very prominent and famous day as far as they were concerned-- the beginning of their life. And so many of them have told me that their life began on the 13th of April, 1945. Anything before that never happened. They just want to forget it.

There are those who would say, and those who do say, that the Holocaust never happened. What would you say to them?

You should have been there. If you'd seen it and smelled it, you'd believe. That's all I can tell them.

Well, sir, it was an outstanding interview. I thank you for your time and for your story.

OK.

Most of all, I thank you for your service to our nation.

Well, thank you very much. It's been a pleasure for me to do this and to contact these people, get their information, and be able to relate that with others. I must add on here that our 30th Infantry Division has annual reunions. And I think it was about five years ago, we had a reunion at Fayetteville.

And we invited as many as would come of these survivors-- and we had I think it was eight came to our reunion in Fayetteville. So we were working up a close relationship with these people. In fact, we just had a reunion in Savannah two weeks ago, and we had four of them come.

Unfortunately, this was during the storm period up in the north, and several who had planned to come were unable to join with us. But we did have one come from Jerusalem-- he and his wife flew over and got here just before the storm hit and was able to get into Savannah. And I think it was last year or the year before, we had two people from Jerusalem come and join us just for this purpose-- to join with their liberators and some others of their surviving peers.

So we're working up a close relationship with these people today. Yeah.

Very good.

Yeah. So I'm working on this as a project now and trying to get in contact with the two new people down in Australia.

Excellent. Thank you, sir.

OK, fine. And nice talking with you, Steve.

Nice talking to you, sir.

All right.

Thank you very much indeed.

If I can help any further, give me a call back.

We will indeed. Thank you so much.

Thank you.

Be well.

Bye bye.