

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with Frank Towers

February 28, 2014

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PREFACE

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Transcribed by Sarah Welch, National Court Reporters Association.

FRANK TOWERS

February 28, 2014

Question: All right. Today is Friday, 28th February 2014. I'm Steven Myes 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? a

Answer: Yeah. I was born in Boston, Massachusetts, June 13, 1917.

Q: Did you grow up in Boston?

A: Well, I grew up there until I was 10 years old.

Q: Okay.

A: And at that time my father's business moved to Vermont, and of course I finished my education there in St. Johnsbury, Vermont, and then in 1940, I graduated from high school in 1935 and went to the University of Florida--I'm sorry--Vermont. And in 1940 I got into the military service and stayed for ten years.

Q: Okay. Let's back up a wee bit. What sort of business was your father in?

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

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

A: Yeah. Growing up there, I enjoyed it better than I did in Boston.

Q: I see. What was the name of the high school that you went to?

A: It was St. Johnsbury Academy.

Q: Okay. Was that an allboys school or was it coed?

A: It was coed. It was sort of a semiprivate school. It was a school founded by the Fairbanks Family. It was the only high school in town, and every student in town was entitled to go to that school and get a good education.

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

A: 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 the outside activities.

Q: And how did you do that? How--what sort of work did you do while in school?

A: Well, I was a stock boy in a store for awhile, 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.

Q: Right. And did you have any friends there? Did you meet your wife in high school for instance?

A: No. I had a lot of friends that--when I left Vermont in 1940, I came down here to Florida, to Camp Blanding, Florida. And spent--been a year training here, and during that time I met this young lady that, eventually, three years later, we married and we have been hanging around together ever since.

Q: I see. And what made you decide to go to the University of Vermont? Had you set your sights on that from the go--

A: Well, I was in the business administration.

Q: Okay.

A: Yeah.

Q: You graduated in 1940?

A: Right.

Q: Did--tell us about your decision to go into the military. Were you drafted, or did you volunteer?

A: 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, but 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.

Q: Right.

A: 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.

Q: 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?

A: To get my commission?

Q: Yes.

A: Okay. 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 already; so we're in (?full duration? 05:29) and there's 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 an offshore candidate school, and I spent three months there training and became a second lieutenant my commission there.

Q: What rank had you attained in enlisted ranks?

A: A second lieutenant.

Q: Yes. Just before became a second lieutenant, what rank has you attained in the rank?

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

Q: You said you went in 1940. What--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?

A: No. At that time, I did not. I could see the clouds of war in Europe, but it was still far away and 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 they we're going to get involved in this thing.

Q: And tell us about your experience in officer candidate school. What was that like?

A: Well, it was rather difficult because I had been working with the--a supply officer in the 43rd Division, and I did not get the full extent of the basic training of the ____ [(07:32)] that all the rest of the guys got. And so when I went to Benning, I was at a disadvantage because I had not had the 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 officer candidate course.

Q: And how did you fair there? How did you do in the end?

A: In the end, I did well. And more than likely I got my commission.

Q: Very good.

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

Q: So you said, you know, when the Japanese did attack Pearl Harbor, that's when you realized--America--that we were in it?

A: That's correct.

Q: Tell us your outages about that. What was that experience like? When did you hear about the attack on Pearl Harbor? How did it effect you? What was your feelings?

A: 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.

Q: I see.

A: And, you know, 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 maybe two or three months. That was a little optimistic.

Q: Indeed. So when were you--when was the decision a made to send you to Europe?

A: I'm sorry. Give me that again.

Q: When did you go to Europe?

A: Okay. 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 into 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 first of November of '43. And they were prioritized to go to Europe, but 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 first 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.

Q: And how were you sent there? Did you go by--I assume you were shipped out by ship?

A: Yeah. We shipped out from Boston on the 12th of February on the SS Argentina, and we joined a convoy just outside of Boston. There was a lot of ships that came from New York and Newport News, Virginia. And it was the largest convoy that ever crossed the ocean together. And we went to--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.

Q: Okay. How was your crossing? Did you have a good crossing?

A: It was a relatively good crossing. We didn't encounter any enemy ships. We had all kinds of battleships with us, and periodically we could see them darting out on some sort of a mission. We just assumed they were out chasing a sub somewhere, but we had no problem in going across. The weather was fairly good but in the North Atlantic in the winter it's never very good, but we didn't encounter any storms or anything; so we had a fair crossing.

Q: Was that your first time out of United States?

A: Yes. I had been to Canada if you call that out of the United Nations, but first time overseas, yes.

Q: What did you--you were in Britain for how many months again? I'm sorry.

A: Until June, about five months.

Q: Did you interact with the British?

A: I'm sorry?

Q: Did you interact with the British?

A: We did somewhat, but not a great deal with the--I think you're probably referring to the British Military, but the British civilians, we had more contact with them.

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

A: They treated us very well. They were very happy to see us come and help them because they had been in the war for four years already. German bombing and that sort of thing.

Q: Sure.

A: So that were very happy to see us come and help them out.

Q: Okay.

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

Q: 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--I'm referring to you being in Britain before being deployed to the continent to combat that is--were you--by this time you were married?

A: No--yes, I was. I married in March of '43.

Q: And you had met you wife at university?

A: No, here at Camp Blanding. She was teaching at Jacksonville at that time, and I met her there in Jacksonville.

Q: Tell us about how you met.

A: How we met?

Q: Yes.

A: That'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 togetherers 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 those dances or whatever function they were having, all they had was soft drinks, and we didn't tend to 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 like it or not.

Q: Right.

A: They volunteered. You, you, you, you, you get Class A uniform on, and you go. So I was one of those that got tiered 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 relationship.

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

A: Yeah.

Q: And what was that like?

A: I'm sorry. I didn't get that question.

Q: What did you think when you first saw her?

A: Well, I just thought she was nice looking girl that I'd be interested coming back to see her again.

Q: Sure.

A: So we started writing back and forth, and we'd go back to Jacksonville and visit with her and met her family, and that was when I--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 in--I think it was January 1st of '42, I invited her to come up to Camp Wheeler, and I give her an engagement ring, and in the following March we were married there at Camp Wheeler.

Q: That was a lovely way to start the new year.

A: Yeah. In a way.

Q: Indeed. 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?

A: Oh yes.

Q: What was it like being away from her?

A: 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.

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

A: I'm sorry?

Q: Did you have any children at that time?

A: No. No we did not.

Q: So when did--when was it made clear to you that you were going to be sent into combat that you were going into continent, and where did you go?

A: Well, we were on the south coast of England, and we could hear the planes of the Air Force going over every night. Bombing somewhere over on the continent and, of course, everything was top secret until the--well, actually it was 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're not hearing any planes coming back; so they were making a wide circle, bombing and then coming back. And it was continuing on all night, and this was unusual because normally they would--the planes would go out and we'd hear them coming back, and that was it.

Q: Right.

A: So we knew that that was probably the beginning of the invasion, and of course then the next day, we read in the newspapers that the invasion had started and right at that time we were moved to the marshalling area near South Hampton 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.

Q: So you entered the European theater, combat theater, at D Day plus five?

A: Yeah. That's right, yeah.

Q: What was your position at the time of deployment?

A: I was the platoon leader in the heavy weapon company, border platoon leader.

Q: What was your first experience of combat, sir?

A: I'm sorry?

Q: What was your first experience of combat?

A: Well, it was different than what we expected. When we were in England, we were all gung ho to go there and tear those guys up and make short of the situation, drive the Germans back and into their own country. But 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 bullets were flying around fast and furious, and we never knew when the silver bullet was going to hit it us. It was an entirely different situation.

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

A: Yeah. It was on the 15th of June.

Q: Okay. Where were you? Tell me about it.

A: We landed on Omaha Beach, and I can recall it very well because this was on my birthday, the 13th of June. I'm just talking with my wife here. 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 by the 29th Division about two to three miles inland and so we stayed in the bivouac area over night, and the next day we marched into this little village of Montmartre Grenyas which the 29th Division the day before had taken but were driven back out of it. And so it was our job to then get back into this 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 by artillery shrapnel. And this was--these guys were being hit, became casualties, and the medics had to take care of them the best they could, and then the next--through the night and the next day we had to get replacements in for those men that were casualties of that day.

Q: As a platoon leader, how did that effect you were you--tell me

A: 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 best suited for us, and to have protection as best we could.

Q: And did you lose any men on that day or on subsequent days?

A: That first day, no. I didn't lose any men, but in subsequent following men, I did lose some men.

Q: That must have been extraordinarily difficult.

A: It was because they were men that I had trained with some back in the states, and some in through my period in England, and during this period of time, you become close to your men and almost like family. And, you know, it hurts when you see a man get wounded or killed, and you feel a partially responsible for it--although it's not your fault--you feel that you lost one of your boys, and it hurt.

Q: You described just now as rather like being 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?

A: 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 years old, what I call kids.

Q: Right.

A: 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.

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

A: We found that--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 rather than technical better weapons. They had better weapons than we had.

Q: Sure. But let's talk about that a little more. How did you view them, the Germans, that is to say the German soldiers. How did you view them?

A: Well, they were good. The most of them, the Wehrmachts, 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.

Q: Okay.

A: But with 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.

Q: Okay. 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 with Jews?

A: Jews?

Q: Yes.

A: Okay. We did not have any contact with Jews. Now, 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 in Europe, slave laborers, and this periodically would appear, but we never pay much attention to it because what we were hearing was that some Jew would escape from some camp--we didn't know about Auschwitz and 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 wouldn't--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, inelegant 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 even cross our mind. That was not why we were there. We weren't there to liberate to 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 through Normandy and Northern France and into Belgium, we did never saw or had any contact with any Jews.

Q: Okay.

A: They were all gone.

Q: Right.

A: 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. Now, we continued up onto northward through Monchengladbach and Hameln, Detmold, and 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.

Q: Sure. As you're fighting along and as you're moving through Belgium and in the Netherlands and Germany, what have you, is the German resistance getting stiffer or can-do you sense has being an officer that it

A: Oh 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 called the rat race, that they were moving back to Germany almost as fast as they could.

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

A: I'm sorry?

Q: You could sense them in retreat?

A: Well, yes. Yeah.

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

A: Right. So we were just chasing them. They were doing what we call--I forgot what it is now--sort of defensive action as they were retreating, and the major part of the German army was moving back eastward toward Germany, and they would leave a small segment of men behind to delay us, to create delaying actions. And that's all we did all the way across northern France and up into Belgium and Holland and 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, but 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 across 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, and we were moving faster than the supply lines could keep up with us. So by the time we got to Holland and the Siegfried Line, we had left thousands of vehicles behind because we ran out of gasoline. We just dropped the vehicles off at the side of the road and abandoned them more or less. 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, with 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.

Q: When did that happen?

A: That was in about February of '44 or '45. I'm sorry. February '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 Wessel and across the Rhine River, which was the biggest major obstacle that we had at that time. So we continued on from crossing the Rhine River 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.

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

A: This was the 10th of April that we captured Brunswick. Now, there was a concentration camp BergenBelsen which was a little bit north of Brunswick, because that was in the British zone. So we had nothing to do with it, but it was there nevertheless. But we didn't even hear about it. We captured Brunswick, and then our next objective was Magdeburg. It was probably 75 or 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 air base. We captured that, and then there was a number of large barracks and a hospital, and we thought nothing of it. We just captured that town and went onto the next town of Farsleben. As we were approaching this little village of Farsleben--this village is probably a thousand 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 attack, an ambush, for you. And they are protecting a trainload of people. We didn't understand exactly what they meant by "a trainload of people." So we had our reconnaissance unit, which was a few tanks and infantry men 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.

Q: Okay. This should have been--just to clarify where we are in time, that should of been probably the 12th or 13th of April. Somewhere around there?

A: This was the 13th of April.

Q: Okay.

A: That was when we liberated Brunswick on the 10th, and I think we liberated Hillersleben on the 11th or 12th, and this was the next day, the 13th of April, 1945. We

saw this train, and not knowing exactly what it was, very cautiously we approached it. They 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. Well, they began to communicate, and what they found was this train had about 2,500 people on it. And it had come from BergenBelsen. Well, what is BergenBelsen? We never heard of it. Okay. They told BergenBelsen 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. This was the first time we had met any Jews.

Q: How close did you physically--how close did you personally get to that train? Were you right on top of it?

A: Well, I was not there the first day.

Q: Okay.

A: See, I was with the other unit, and this was the 743rd tank battalion, which was part of our unit. They were the lead reconnaissance group that were up in the very front. So they were the first ones to meet this group of people, and I didn't see them actually until the next day.

Q: And when you did see them

A: 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 BergenBelsen 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 was a train that 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 BergenBelsen. Now, it took six days for that train to come from BergenBelsen to Farsleben. That train was made up of what they call cattle cars--cattle wagons. They're like our small freight trains. They're a smaller than our normal freight trains. We had used this type of freight train in World War I, and we called them 40 and 8s. Noting that each car was capable of handling 40 men or 8 horses, and that was the general mode of transportation back in World War I, to move troops around by train.

Q: Okay.

A: So these are these cattle cars they call them, 40 and 8s, 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 fivegallon bucket that was their sanitary facility. And if you can imagine 75 or 80 people crammed into one of those small freight cars, and the guy over here in the corner needs to relieve himself, there's no way that he can get over to that bucket and relieve himself. So the only alternative he had was just 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 on the floor was by exhaustion that they would just crumple and fall down to to floor, and they just had to stay there. And that's the condition when we opened these cars up that we found these people, stinking from their feces and urine of six days, dirty, lice infested. It was a horrible sight. Something that we could not believe that was happening.

Q: How did you react when you saw them, and how did they react when they saw you as Americans?

A: Well, we were reacted, you know, we didn't believe what we were seeing. You know, we could communicate very vaguely because 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--which was 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 kind of 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 condition 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 more 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 of soup that they got every day.

Q: How were they clothed when you saw them?

A: Well, some of them were fairly well clothed. The Dutch people and a few of the others were being held more as hostage 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 was very ragged. They were not in the stripped prison uniforms that you often see in 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. It's too bad. And the shoes, they were just worn out. Basically there was nothing left of their shoes,

just the tops. They were in horrible condition as far as clothing was concerned and hungry.

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

A: Oh no. These prisoners were from eastern country: Hungry, Poland, Romania, Ukraine, a number of them were from Holland, a few from France. They were a 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 a few 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 call Pigeon English. They had a word here or 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 be 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 a very, very limited ration, and we were eating high protein food, and as we gave them a candy bar or chocolate or something that we had in our pocket, it was so--their bodies just could not assimilate this high protein food that we had. And they would just gobbled it down, and as soon as they did, they would throw it up. And, of course, by this time the medics--we had gotten the medics in there because there was just 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.

Q: And what were the--you're talking about the rations that presumably the medical ward took over. Were those--what were those? Were they Krations or

A: Yeah, they would take our Krations and Crations and water them down so that they were more easily assimilated by these people.

Q: How long did it take to get those--the corpsmen and the medical personnel--their--how long of a delay was it before the time that you saw them?

A: It was a matter of hours.

Q: I see.

A: Just a matter of hours, because they were located with our division headquarters, and that's where I was at the time.

Q: Right.

A: That they were brought in there and administered help to them, and this was 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 anymore casualties. So I was delegated then to round up transportation and take these people out of there to this town of Hillersleben that we had liberated a couple of days before where there was a 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. And 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 stinking 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, of course, they were given towels and soap, and they were so happy to get cleaned up to little bit, but even through the shower, they could not get rid of the lice that were infested in their hair and in their pubic hairs. And so after they finished the shower, we dusted them with DDT. Now, DDT is today a prohibited item because it's a carcinogenic[sic] item and is, by law, is prohibited for use. But at that time that was the best technology that we had to fight lice and fleas any kind of insect that they might have.

Q: Did it work?

A: It worked. So then we had the German people were ordered to bring clothing to this point and of course they were reclothed, and then the single people were put in the barracks. The married people were put in to some of the private homes that were available. And at this point, I left them. They went back to my unit and continued on my job, and we fought our way onto Magdeburg and we attacked, captured Magdeburg on the 18th of April, and as far as we were concerned, that was the end of the war. Because the Elm 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 wait 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 of course, in talking with some of them, we found out where they came from, and that they had been incarcerated at BergenBelsen, and they told us a story about their life in BergenBelsen and them being put on the train, and then we captured them.

Q: Did they tell you about mass killings? Did they tell you about--

A: Well, no because BergenBelsen was not a killing camp you might say. It was a camp where they worked 1215 hours a day, and the working conditions were not good. The food was not good. Their living conditions not good. They told us about their life there in BergenBelsen. I was going to say they didn't have a large crematorium or gas chambers or anything like that in BergenBelsen. It was just a slave labor camp, and part of it was an exchange camp, as I mentioned before, to exchange the people for German prisoners, but they told us about the hardships they had, the life that they had, the living conditions in the barracks there at BergenBelsen was very bad. They had bunks, I think four high, and three or four people had to sleep in one bunk. The living conditions were very, very bad there at BergenBelsen. So this is basically the first time that we ever heard of Jews, slave labor, crematoriums, gas chambers. We never heard anything like that before. 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 Auschwitz and Dachau were being overcrowded there, and they moved them into BergenBelsen, 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 so, you know, we were not trained as humanitarians. We were trained as soldiers. And basically when we saw this train and these Jews, the condition that they were in, we really didn't know what to do. We did the best we could with what we had. Most of it was wrong, by feeding them the food the way we did.

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

A: Well, we weren't--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 their freedom and liberty back that they had had back in 1940 when they were invaded by the Germans. The Jewish situation was just sort of a sideline that happened that we didn't know anything about. We didn't know what was going on until we saw, and then we believed.

Q: And did that change your attitudes towards the Germans?

A: Well, basically 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. The war was over. I think it was the 8th of May; so it was only about three weeks after we found this train that the war ended. Of course, 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 in it. They knew about it. They knew what was going on.

Q: When did you hear that the war had ended, and how did you hear about it?

A: I'm sorry?

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

A: Well, we were in Magdeburg until--basically just sitting there waiting for the Russians to come up in front of us, and I think we got word through our higher channels came down to us that the war had officially ended on the 8th of May. Like I say, we were in Magdeburg, 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, they captured it, that the war was going to be over very, very soon.

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

A: Yeah, we did.

Q: What did you think of them?

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

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

A: That 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 written to her. She had saved all my letters, and she returned letters 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 we were going to do with this stuff? We dumped it, and it was the worst thing I ever did 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 were not allowed to tell where we were or what we were doing.

Q: Sure.

A: But in a coded way I could relate to her where I was and what I was doing. So all those things were in there, 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.

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

A: I'm sorry again?

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

A: Oh, when we ended the war, basically the 8th of May, we moved southward about 50 miles into an area of occupation, and it was at that time we were notified that the 30th Division was prioritized to come back to the States and have a 15day leave and do some 30day training and go to the Pacific and help finish the war in the Pacific. So we were geared for that, and that was in probably in July. So in midearly 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 fact, ended the war, and we felt right then and there that we would not--have--we may have to go to the Pacific, but there would not be any war to be fought as we had planned. We came home, and we were given a 30day leave and during that time, the Great White Fathers of 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 sent telegrams to everybody telling them to report to their nearest military installation for further orders, which they did. And the most of them got their discharge, and that ended their military service.

Q: But you stayed on?

A: 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 30th Division, which was then we head quartered 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 occupation duty, and we were given the opportunity to 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 and actually the Hawaii or the Caribbean were at the top of the list, and that's what I chose, but 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. Now, during that time, after I was over there for about four five months, dependants 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--I'm sorry.

Q: Lets back up just for a little bit.

A: Yeah.

Q: In terms of returning to the United States.

A: Yeah.

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

A: Oh yeah. Going back to the time we left England that we came home on the Queen Marry, commuted to New York, and went to Camp Kilmer, New Jersey, and that's where we were given our leave. So I took the train and went to Boston. Now, 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 got home, of course I got to the train, took me into Boston, and I got in a cab to take me to my home, and it was a pretty emotional reunion. Of course I had sent telegrams to them and telephoned called telling them that I was coming. So they were aware that I was going to be there.

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

A: Well, I can't really remember that very well, but I know it was very emotional. 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. And of course, my mother was there too, and to be alive was the main thing. We never knew all 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.

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

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

Q: Okay.

A: 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.

Q: And did they--did you stay long enough for them to go school there?

A: Oh, no. No. No. The girls were two years old, and my son was 1 year old, and it was then that we made a decision to terminate--my contact was coming to an end, and we decided to terminate the contact and come back to the states. So in '49 we came back to the states.

Q: And where did you settle, and what did you do?

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

Q: So what did you do in Florida?

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

Q: And you've been employed ever since?

A: I've been here ever since. We built our house here in 1950 and been right here ever since.

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

A: 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 notebooks that I had kept sort of a diary in. And I had a lot of information about this train--the 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, and--but a little later, when computers--when the university got 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, but it was not until 2005 that I had the opportunity to go back the Magdeburg, Germany. Now, this was 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 Ph.D 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 claimed that they had liberated Magdeburg, but 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 Q: How did the Americans really liberate

Magdeburg? Well, of course 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 the April, 1945. She put this all together and wrote up her thesis, and she did get her Ph.D. 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 of the impression that the Russians had liberated Magdeburg. Now, we're coming up on April of 2005, which then was going to be the--I think the 40th or 50th anniversary of the liberation--this just happened to coincide with the 1200th anniversary of the founding of the City of Magdeburg. So they were planing to have a big celebration on the anniversary of the founding of Magdeburg as well as the liberation of Magdeburg. So 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 pulte 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 in a matter of a few days after we had liberated the Farsleben group. Anyway, the mayor, through another person, invited this man who--this Jew who had been a slave laborer in Magdeburg in the pulte 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, the man who--the 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 was a fascinating thing that I, a liberator, and he, a Jewish slave laborer, should end up living so close together here in Florida.

Q: And have you been in communication with him since?

A: I was. I'm sorry. He just died about a month ago. Anyway, after we came back from Magdeburg, he sent me an email saying, "Frank, look at this web site. It is tremendous." And I opened up the web site, and it was a web site created by a history teacher up in the 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 related to you. And how did this guy get this story? So I got in contact with this teacher to find out what his relationship was to this web site and 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 in, and read them. They discussed them, but there was one boy who 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. Now, at the time, he put his web site out he got in--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, and of course she's been there ever since, and she saw that web site, and she got back in contact with the teacher, and through that--and then he had two or three other hits up in 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, you know, I've got this story about the train, and want 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 had been 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 and had practiced and 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 interested, and she could speak much better English than he could; although it 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 those 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 this--on the train originally, there was about 2,500 people, and of them, there were about 600 children. Now, I say children. These are people 21 years of age and less.

Q: Okay.

A: Now, the Germans were quite meticulous about keeping records. When that train left BergenBelsen, and we captured it there at Farsleben, the train commander had a list of all 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 BergenBelsen 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 in the 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 300plus 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 research through the Internet, I have found

235 of these people, and I've been in contact with each one either by mail physical (phone interference)

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

A: Either by email or snail mail.

Q: Okay. And how many did you contact?

A: I've contacted 235.

Q: And they--did most of them respond to you?

A: I'm sorry?

Q: Did most of them respond to you?

A: 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 young kids.

Q: Sure.

A: 21 years and less. Those who were ten years and younger, they really don't remember much.

Q: Okay.

A: 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 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 American countries, Australia, African countries, Canada. Some got passports to the United States. So whatever place these people had passports for, that's where they went. They went--they scattered all over the world because they were citizens of that country.

Q: Sure.

A: And we at the time of the liberation furnished transportation to them to whatever country they had a passport for. Now, just last night, I was talking with a girl--lady in

Australia, by Skype, and she said she had just found two more girls or ladies in Australia. So that is the way this thing snowballed.

Q: Yes.

A: So I got two more people that I've got to start researching in Australia. But we had a lot of them come here to the United States too, but most of them are settled up in around the New York area.

Q: Okay.

A: There's very few here in Florida, and there's a group up in Carolina and a few out in California, and they're just scattered all over. So two years ago, this young lady in Israel thought it would be a nice idea to have a reunion of some of these people. So we--she sent word out to them, and I sent word out to the people in the States about a reunion that they wanted to have in April--two and a half years ago. So we have 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 about 500 people. And we assembled at the Weizmann Institute there in Rehovot. They had a large auditorium in which we met.

Q: What was that like seeing them again now as grown people who had made lives

A: It was very emotional to meet these people that I had had a little hand in liberating 6569 years ago. And they were very receptive and very thankful to me to be one of their liberators, and in fact I have 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 those people, and the thing is the 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 the Tel Aviv, and all the little kibbutz's all over Israel--Palestine at that time.

Q: Sure.

A: And so they were really never had any contact with each other, and this was the first time that they had contact with each other as well as me, as a liberator. Now, the most of these survivors had never talked about the Holocaust to their families. As they grew up, they just wanted to forget the bad memories there--that they just wanted to forget it. The day of their liberation, that was the day of a new life for them. Anything before that, they just wanted to forget about it and not talk about it. The children would ask them, you know, what happened? I don't want to talk about it. Forget it. And we'll talk about something else. And this was going on for years until this reunion time--that I told the story--the one that I more or less had related to you now to these children, and they are learning for the first time what happened to their parents, a little bit about the

BergenBelsen 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.

Q: Sure.

A: So this was a whole new story for these children and grandchildren to learn about something about the liberation of their people. Now, what one person in particular, 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 BergenBelsen 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 one example of their feeling toward their liberation--that they feel 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 wanted to forget it.

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

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

Q: Well, sir, it was an outstanding interview. Thank you for your time and for your story.

A: Okay.

Q: But most of all, I thank you for your service to our nation.

A: Thank you very much. It has been a pleasure for me to do this and to contact these people and get their information and be able to relate that with others. Now, 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 come to our reunion in Fayetteville. So we--we're 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 had planned to come were unable to join with us, but we did have one come from Jerusalem--him and his wife flew over, 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 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. Yup.

Q: Very good.

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

Q: Excellent. Thank you, sir.

A: Okay. Fine and nice talking with you, Steve.

Q: Nice talking to you, sir. Thank you very much indeed.

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

Q: We will indeed. Thank you so much.

A: Thank you.

Q: Be well.

Conclusion of Interview