

HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

PHILIP BONNER

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Philip G. Solomon
Date: November 29, 1990

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Gratz College
Melrose Park, PA 19027

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PB - Philip Bonner [interviewee]
PS - Philip G. Solomon [interviewer]
Date: November 29, 1990

Tape one, side one:

PS: I'm interviewing Mr. Philip Bonner for the Holocaust Oral History Archive of Gratz College. Mr. Bonner is a veteran of World War II. The date is November 29th, 1990. Mr. Bonner, can you please tell me where in Europe, and in what unit, you were serving?

PB: Yeah, Phil, Mr. Solomon. I was with the 159th Combat Engineer Battalion, and we were assigned to several corps, troops and several armies, mostly with the 3rd Army and the 9th Army.

PS: You entered France on the beach in...

PB: In Normandy.

PS: ...Normandy, was that...

PB: Yeah, yes. We were there. We entered it there...

PS: When you...

PB: ...at Utah.

PS: When you began your time in combat, were you aware at that time of the concentration camp that you would eventually liberate?

PB: Never suspected anything like that.

PS: No.

PB: Never had no idea.

PS: Before, in your travels and combat through France, did you see any evidence at all of Nazi atrocities against humanity? Either against the French people, or prisoners?

PB: Oh, we ran into one instance in a town as we were movin' up what they call the Brittany Peninsula. We had broke through and we were opening up a seaport called St. Malo. S-T, capital M-A-L-O. And in these towns, I can't recall the name, I think it is Dinan, D-, it's something like that famous song *Dinah*? It's D-I-N-A-N [Belgium], and we were passing through these towns and the French underground realized who we were and they started to help us. And I think it was the town of Dinan or one of the towns that we had to surround the town. We couldn't go in and party at night because maybe the Germans would counterattack. But as the towns moved ahead, and it was either Dinan or up at, near Saint-Brieuc, but the word had passed that the Americans were on their way and the Free French started to take these towns. And the Free French were shootin' up the Germans and stealin' their uniforms and their shoes. There was a very scarcity of them hobnailed shoes that they wore. And the Germans, before we got there, we just didn't know what directions we were moving, and neither did they. But I guess they took it upon themselves that we were moving

in great force. But there was only 550 of us. And we were playing cat and mouse. Our main objective was to get to Brest and open that seaport up.

PS: Yeah.

PB: So, this town was taken by the French underground, and the Germans did counterattack, and captured a lot of these Free French. And what they did is the same thing that the French did to them. They hung them on the poles, and they took all their clothes and they were gonna wipe out all the men in the town. Now whether we, we didn't know to find out, but there was an awful lot of Free French hangin' from poles. So, there was atrocities there.

PS: Did you see them?

PB: Yes, we cut them down, but we couldn't...

PS: Yeah, they were...

PB: ...stay to bury them.

PS: ...Free French...

PB: Free French underground.

PS: ...who had been fighting...

PB: Well, once they found out, maybe they were fighting on their own, but they sort of came to, they wanted to hook up. A matter of fact, we did take some with us when we went up to Brest, and even through France we took some...

PS: Some of the Free French.

PB: Free French. As long as we knew that they were all right. We didn't know whether they might be spies.

PS: Were they uniformed?

PB: No, no uniforms. No, they had some type of a, we call them grease guns, that fired something like a .45 bullet. And they had a lot of them and grenades. And they helped us knock out one of the roadblocks.

PS: Was that similar to the weapon we had we called "grease guns"?

PB: Yeah.

PS: It was a .45 caliber...

PB: Yeah.

PS: Automatic...

PB: Yeah, it looked like...

PS: [unclear].

PB: It wasn't a pistol. It was a gun.

PS: Yes.

PB: Something, looked like something like you would grease a car with.

PS: Yeah, we called them, in fact that was my personal weapon.

PB: Was it? Yeah, okay.

PS: We called them grease guns.

PB: Well this is what the French, they must have [unclear]...

PS: It was like a Tommy gun only all...

PB: Right.

PS: ...metal.

PB: But it didn't have like a wooden stock in the back.

PS: Yeah, that's...

PB: It just had like a...

PS: Exactly.

PB: ...little metal in front.

PS: That was my...

PB: Was it?

PS: ...personal weapon.

PB: Right. Well then you are familiar with it then.

PS: So, going through France you did see that as one example...

PB: Oh yeah, and where they...

PS: ...of Naz-...

PB: Cut all their women's hair off. Now, the French would get a hold of the women as we would capture them, and they would take them and undress them and cut all their hair off.

PS: Did you see any...

PB: And put them in the street. But they didn't torture them though. But I, we heard that they were torturing the French. We didn't witness it with our eyes.

PS: Yeah.

PB: No.

PS: Then you entered Germany, and what area did you cross from France into Germany?

PB: Well, what we did is when we first went into Germany here, we were at Bastogne in Luxembourg [Province in Belgium]. You know, we held a, the line there. And we did get commendation from a general. It's in our book here. He came back and said that we're one of the, oh yeah, the only outfit that he knew--he was I think general of the 6th Army--that we're the only outfit that advanced on the Battle of the Bulge. We're the only ones that advanced on. And he brought us two cases of champagne. I could read it to you later. But then, after Bastogne and the Battle of the Bulge we moved along into Germany and there was towns here, from Luxembourg. We went into Burg, Rhineland. And then we assaulted along the Mosel River and we captured a town called Koblenz, where the Mosel and the Rhine River came together.

PS: Yeah.

PB: And an infantry division hooked up with us. And then we were gonna go up and see if we could hold on to the Remagen Bridge, but they brought part of our outfit back, and Patton gave us orders to assault at night with assault boats at a town called Boppard. We assaulted with the 87th Division. It's a town, I think it's capital B-O-P-P-A-

R-D. And we assaulted at night. And they told all the Christian boys and the Jewish boys to make sure that, you know, we see our rabbis and see the priest and things, because they expected 95% casualties.

PS: [unclear].

PB: And I know why, because when we took the 87th across that night, the tracers, what saved our lives is the guns were set back on a line hill, and a 30 millimeter, something like our 50 caliber shell...

PS: Yeah.

PB: ...ricocheted off the roadside, and we were in these low, small, flat boats, and we had twelve men and two engineers. And then all of a sudden flares went up just like day light. But the tracers were...

PS: Oh, the German flares.

PB: German flares. They set them off. And there was barges all sunk...

PS: That was the, what, Mosel River?

PB: No, this was the Rhine.

PS: Oh, the Rhine.

PB: This was the Rhine River. Yeah, the Mosel was not too much trouble. We only had a, encountered a little, you know, fighting there.

PS: Yeah.

PB: This was at the Rhine River proper.

PS: Then you...

PB: That's when we...

PS: Went deeper into Germany?

PB: Yeah, oh yeah.

PS: At that time, when you were fighting within Germany, were you aware of the mass murder of millions of people as we later found out?

PB: No. No.

PS: You didn't...

PB: No. And according to these pictures I have here, I had a big brown camera. They called it a Brownie. It was a square box camera. And I was forbidden under law that I be shot if I took any pictures before we got into Germany. We got permission when we opened up this prison camp. That was, the infantry had gone in with the tank corps, and they were burying the bodies then, with bulldozers. Then, I have pictures I had here I took with...

PS: Yeah.

PB: ...this brown camera. You see them with your naked eye.

PS: Yeah.

PB: These pictures here.

PS: Before you reached the concentration camp, did you liberate any prisoner-of-war-camps or...

PB: No, we did liberate some of the prisoners who were working along railroads. And they were in all different kinds of, you know...

PS: Yeah.

PB: Work...

PS: They were mostly...

PB: Eh...

PS: What nationality?

PB: I would say Canadian, French, British, Australian, some Americans. But they were a little better fed. They musta got a piece of bread or something and a cup of water.

PS: Yeah, I was just gonna ask you...

PB: But they had all different kinds of...

PS: About their physical...

PB: They had of a, they musta gave them something to eat, these...

PS: Yeah. What type of a...

PB: To keep the railroad going.

PS: Oh, they were working, doing the rail...

PB: Repairing...

PS: Railroads.

PB: Roads and railroads.

PS: Yeah.

PB: Well we would encounter maybe two or three hundred of them along the railroad. They didn't know who we were either, and then they found out we could speak English.

PS: Yeah.

PB: They realized we were Americans.

PS: They were mostly prisoners-of-war or civ-...

PB: Yeah, they had a...

PS: Slave laborers?

PB: No, they were prisoners of war. This was slave labor in the prison camp we opened up with the infantry, called Buchenwald.

PS: But at that point you had not heard, you knew nothing at all...

PB: Nothing.

PS: ...about concentration camps...

PB: No.

PS: Or that there had been mass murder...

PB: No.

PS: ...of millions?

PB: No. But we did, I heard that they did take the *Bürgermeister* [mayor] from a town outside of Buchenwald and they brought him in, which is only about 17 kilometers

away. And him and the wife, they showed him the atrocity. And he went home--they say, now I didn't see it with my own eyes--and hung himself with piano wire. But he didn't realize...

PS: I heard that.

PB: Yeah, I didn't, I never got to see the *Bürgermeister*.

PS: So, prior to your arrival, at the site of the concentration camp, about the only liberated displaced persons or prisoners of war you saw was that one, the one incident?

PB: Yeah, at Buchenwald.

PS: The railroads.

PB: Yeah, the real atrocities where the bodies were...

PS: Yeah.

PB: ...being burnt and...

PS: You would say that they were in recently good physical condition prior to...

PB: Where, in prison camp?

PS: No, no, no in the railroad work.

PB: Oh yeah. No, they weren't...

PS: Prior to...

PB: ...what you call healthy.

PS: Yeah.

PB: But they had a little stamina about them.

PS: Yeah, probably because...

PB: Where they could stand up and work.

PS: They had to be...

PB: They had to work.

PS: Work.

PB: Yeah.

PS: Now, can you please give the name of the camp that you liberated, and its location?

PB: Well, we weren't the first ones in there to liberate. The infantry and the tank got in there before us, but we came up later in the afternoon. And that there Buchenwald, I'm trying to think what town it was near.

PS: Weimar?

PB: I think it was near Weimar.

PS: Weimar.

PB: Yeah, it was. W-E-I-M-A-R. Yes, it was near Weimar.

PS: Yeah.

PB: Yes. Now...

PS: Do you remember the...

PB: We did go into a town too that we took, it was called Erfurt. It was The City of Flowers. And a beautiful city.

PS: Did you...

PB: Now, we did encounter again prisoners there. And we had to capture, take the guns away from them and all kinds of cameras. And as we went up to different doors, this one fellow, who was working on the--we called them Limeys, Englishmen, he said, "Aye, bloke, can you get me a Telefunken?"

PS: [chuckling]

PB: I said, "What the H- is a Telefunken?" He said, "It's a bloomin' radio!" Well we were smashing any, with short waves. So I went in one house looking for guns and cameras. And this German here, he couldn't speak English, and I couldn't understand him. But when I told the Limey to pick the, the Englishman to pick the radio up, he just had no strength. So I carried this great, big Telefunken radio out and put in a jeep. And now we took him out to the airport, C-47s. They were allowed to take one thing back.

PS: Yeah.

PB: And he had no possessions.

PS: Do you remember the date of, that you entered Buchenwald?

PB: Oh...

PS: The approximate date?

PB: No, but I came in...

PS: April...

PB: Wait a minute, I can, here is a date here in our book, *Crossing the Rhine*. I have to go back here. I haven't studied this book or anything. I haven't studied this book or anything. Now wait a minute. Let's see, this is on Hill 313. This is when we, the Germans came at us in the Battle of the Bulge. They came at us in a V-shape, with the SS leading them.

PS: Yeah.

PB: We couldn't believe our eyes. Well, they had been shootin' our medics along with the 101st. Some of our outfit was in with the 101st. So we got word that they were shootin' our medics.

PS: We must have been very close.

PB: We must have been very close.

PS: Because we were reconnaissance for the 101st.

PB: Were ya? Yeah.

PS: In fact we were 101st Cavalry.

PB: Were ya? Okay. Well then you knew you had to have a...

PS: And so we...

PB: Countersign, a passport.

PS: Yeah, oh, sure.

PB: And if you ever mixed up one of these the 101st, they'd put a bullet in your stomach. Well...

PS: Yeah, we were in...

PB: This is what happened here. See, they came at us in that hill in a V-shape. We just couldn't believe it. But, I can't, now, if you hold on a second I'll find out. Here's Germany. Where we got into Buchenwald?. We were with the 8th Corps then I think. We took the 87th Division across. See, we bounced back between the 20th Corps and the 8th Corps. Now, with the Rhine here--after the Rhine. By mid-April the German army as such was broken, and they were in different small groups and let's see...

PS: Yeah, I believe it was the third week...

PB: In April.

PS: The third week of April in 1945.

PB: It says here April the 17th.

PS: Yeah, that's...

PB: It was something...

PS: That's about...

PB: It was around there.

PS: Yeah.

PB: It was in around that date. Somewhere, I just can't remember. It's been 47 years ago.

PS: When you entered Buchenwald, to the best of your memory, can you please describe what you saw at the camp?

PB: Well, when we first entered, the stench was atrocious. And they were trying to bury bodies with bulldozers. And then I did--I was allowed to bring out my big square camera, which was called a Brownie then, and I took these pictures that are in front of you here, with the bodies piled up. And, I took other pictures. And then we were there a day or two. And then, and the ones that had strength painted this sign.

PS: Yeah, I see.

PB: See, and that's when you stand there with a [unclear] on.

PS: And can you...

PB: But then...

PS: Can you read the sign for us please?

PB: Yeah, the sign here, I have a [unclear], it says here on a wooden building, "The German political prisoners welcome their American friends." In other words these were all prisoners of all different nations.

PS: And you...

PB: And even some were Germans that were in there too, but mostly Jewish and Polish and what they call Slovak, Ukrainians. And we were givin' em K rations and C rations and we didn't realize that it was killin' em.

PS: Oh, yes.

PB: Because the food was too--and the medics gave us hell; our doctor said, "My God! They're, they've only been eating potato skins and water and their kidneys, they won't..."

PS: Yeah, their...

PB: Well, when someone's hungry, you're gonna feed 'em. And they were huggin' and kissin' us.

PS: Even most of the doctors themselves didn't even...

PB: No.

PS: ...realize...

PB: We didn't realize.

PS: That there was so little left of the, of their digestive systems so they couldn't...

PB: They couldn't digest it.

PS: They [unclear].

PB: But they were so happy to get food.

PS: Now, at Buchenwald, at the time you entered, you saw both some living and, of course, a lot of bodies.

PB: Yeah.

PS: Can you estimate like about how many dead you saw? That were still hadn't...

PB: Well, these pictures I took here, this we-, now the bulldozer, I'd say they were pushing there maybe 100 in at a time, into this homemade grave. See, I think we come up on 'em faster than they expected.

PS: Yeah.

PB: And these pictures here I took, alongside the, these are like a crematory, where they cremated the bodies, you know? I would say they were in piles of 50 to 100.

PS: Yeah.

PB: Yeah.

PS: So you would say there were...

PB: Hundreds, yes.

PS: Hundreds and hundreds of bodies.

PB: Hundreds of bodies, yes, all over.

PS: And many had already been buried.

PB: Yes, they were trying to bury them.

PS: Did you see a...

PB: But they tried to cremate most of them.

PS: Yeah. Did you see at that time many living? Survivors.

PB: Yeah, they were speaking in all different languages, and they were crying, and they were happy, and they were huggin' us and everything, and they just couldn't even describe how happy they were, you know?

PS: And their physical condition was...

PB: I never seen anybody, just skin and bones. Some of them were coming out, just like a skeleton you would see with your skin on. I never, never witnessed anything in this, like this in my life.

PS: Can you estimate how many living survivors you saw?

PB: Oh, I would say there was about maybe 500 or 1000. How many there were I couldn't, I was just totally, everybody was taken aback. We just weren't lookin' at numbers. You know I, everybody was in daze.

PS: You really didn't know...

PB: No, we just were...

PS: ...the concentration camp was here until you really stumbled on it? Were you ready...

PB: Well, no, no. We were always sent to where there was trouble...

PS: Yeah.

PB: Our outfit. And...

PS: Well [unclear].

PB: We never knew...

PS: [unclear].

PB: But we weren't the first ones to get in there.

PS: Yeah.

PB: Now, the infantry opened it up, broke the locks on the gate and, we got in there, you know, like late in the afternoon. We were always at different locations, our outfit.

PS: Yeah.

PB: We were like a bastard battalion. Wherever they needed us. And they told us that they needed us over at the camp.

PS: Do you think that many of the living survivors you saw later succumbed because their condition was too far gone to be saved?

PB: I would say that, lack of food. Yes. I would say that.

PS: You believe that this particular camp, Buchenwald, was set up for mixed groups? You say Jews and probably a lot of political prisoners.

PB: Oh, definitely. They're the ones that wrote on here...

PS: All...

PB: Anybody that was against his party.

PS: Yeah.

PB: Yeah, they were stuck in there, yeah.

PS: Did you see any children?

PB: This I can't truly say.

PS: Among either the living or the dead.

PB: I was just taken aback. I didn't, I...

PS: Yeah.

PB: Was dazed. I didn't really know that, whether there was children or not. I took no notice.

PS: Could you see...

PB: To me they were mostly adults, but they were just, to me they were living dead.

PS: Yeah.

PB: That's what they looked like.

PS: Did you see any women, do you recall?

PB: I can't recall. But we did go to another camp, and they were a little, had a little more fat on them. And we had to strip them down bare. But we had a line where we couldn't go across, and we're all standing there with the little pencil stickin' out our pants. And we're throwin' 'em over chocolate bars and oranges and things. But we weren't allowed to touch 'em. And then they had to spread their arms and legs and their crotch open so we could spray them with DDT. And we stood and watched the, and then some of them who could speak English told us that they worked in ammunition; they were fed a little bit better. And a lot of them got shot there because they would set the shell to go off, there would be a dud.

PS: Oh.

PB: And we had many time a dud come in. And if they got caught doin' it, they were shot. So they did make the shells for the...

PS: Yeah.

PB: For the ammuni-...

PS: This was a...

PB: This was a camp, all girls.

PS: Camp near, oh, oh, all...

PB: Yeah, it wasn't far away.

PS: Near, they were near Buchenwald.

PB: Near Buchenwald. Yeah, it was all women in it. And we had a, we enjoyed watching them get sprayed, you know?

PS: Yeah.

PB: They were all nude, but they had a little bit of meat on them. They were nothing like the ones in Buchenwald.

PS: Yeah.

PB: The ones in Buchenwald were just, you know...

PS: They too were, probably felt a little, fed a little better for, as the railroad...

PB: Because they were, right. That's 'cause they were...

PS: As the railroad people.

PB: They were working on the ammunition. Some of them told us that quite a few of them got shot, that they got caught, that, you know, making these shells that wouldn't go off.

PS: What...

PB: I think they did save quite a few American lives, because a lot of shells came in dud.

PS: Were you given any responsibilities at all in connection with the prisoners-with the living?

PB: Eh...

PS: I mean as far as caring and...

PB: No, that would seem to be taken care of by somebody. It wasn't our outfit. Maybe our doctors did, you know what I mean?

PS: Yeah.

PB: Our ours was just to help them and say, clothe them, and see that they get washed and...

PS: Were there any German guards still there when you entered?

PB: Not when we entered, but we heard that they turned the SS over to the people, and they threw water on the barrack floors.

PS: Oh.

PB: But the people were gorging their eyes out, the ones that had strength, and pulling their arms off and, so we didn't allow this.

PS: Right.

PB: So...

PS: No...

PB: I didn't see this with my own eyes.

PS: Yeah.

PB: But they said that they let some of the prisoners, they let off some steam, and go after them, the SS They were the bastards. See, the SS always had somewhere tattooed on them the SS...

PS: Yeah, the...

PB: Thing, under their privates or...

PS: Yeah.

PB: Under their arm or somewhere they had SS, and that's how we could tell.

PS: Yeah, the, like two lightning bolts.

PB: Right, that's right, yeah. So they were the head of the camp, the SS was, but there was regular soldiers in there. But you know they tried to hide too. They tried to put on prisoners' clothing. But they eventually...

PS: Yeah, some...

PB: They caught them.

PS: Yeah some of them...

PB: Well, the prisoners knew who they...

PS: ...tried to...

PB: Well, the prisoners knew who they were.

PS: Yeah.
PB: Yeah.
PS: There were I think just a few cases where there were good guards, in other words, that had treated the prisoners re-, and...
PB: Like human beings, yea.
PS: ...the prisoners helped them to escape.
PB: Oh, yeah?
PS: Probably there were very, very few.
PB: Very few, yeah.
PS: Your...
PB: Well, there's good and bad in all nations. You know...
PS: Yeah, there were...
PB: I mean they, a lot of them didn't want to go to war, I guess.
PS: So your outfit actually did not come prepared to handle this.
PB: Nnn nnn.
PS: As to medical supplies or food?
PB: Well, that all, it was all brought up.
PS: Yeah.
PB: Days later. This was such a shock to everybody. Everybody was amazed. Now, a lot of things there you probably never heard of. But, there was a woman there, and they called her the...
PS: Oh, the Bitch...
PB: The Bitch of Buchenwald.
PS: Yeah, the, yeah.
PB: Did you see the lampshade that she made out...
PS: Yes, yeah.
PB: Did you see the fingernails that she...
PS: Yeah, right, the...
PB: Yeah. She was a bitch. You know she only went to jail for about five years.
PS: Yeah. She was the wife of the Commandant.
PB: Right! She was the wife of the Commandant, yeah.
PS: The--I can't think of her name.
PB: I can't either. You know?
PS: Claus¹ or...
PB: I can picture, I can visualize her...
PS: Yeah.

¹ Ilse Koch was the wife of Karl Otto Koch, commandant of Buchenwald. She served as a *SS-Aufseherin* [overseer] at the camp and known for sadistic behavior including making lampshades from human skin. She was tried at Nuremberg post-war and sentenced to life imprisonment by a West German Court. (Jewishvirtuallibrary.org)

PB: And I can't...
PS: No, I've heard the name so...
PB: Yeah.
PS: At the moment I just can't...
PB: Yeah.
PS: Remember it.
PB: You know, it's been 46 years, but I can still picture her face. I can still see her.

PS: Is there anything, Phil, in addition to what you have described, anything else that you saw within the camp that you would like to mention? You saw the ovens and the crematory?

PB: Yeah, I seen the ovens, the crematory...
PS: And...
PB: The gas chambers.
PS: You saw the gas chambers.
PB: Where they--you could see where their hands were...
PS: Yeah.
PB: ...scrapin' to get air, you know? And, I heard that everybody they put in, there they didn't come out.

PS: Yeah.
PB: You know, that must have been a terrible way to die. They packed them in there like sardines I heard. We didn't actually see any bodies in these gas chambers at the time. They were empty. But we did see bodies in the crematories, you know, where they were, the ovens were still hot.

PS: Yes.
PB: And they were crematin' 'em. And then we seen where they had piles of little pieces of gold and silver where they knocked their teeth out...

PS: Yeah.
PB: And things, you know. Things like that.
PS: When you and your outfit, your engineering battalion entered, was that, do you recall about how, was it hours, just a matter of a few hours after the first troops entered?

PB: No, it was quite a while.
PS: It was the same day?
PB: Well, according to the way, the information we got, that the infantry had opened it up early in the morning.

PS: Yeah.
PB: And we got there sort of, early evening.
PS: In other words...
PB: So...
PS: They came in...

PB: There were soldiers in there.

PS: Yeah. So you saw it pretty much in the raw state.

PB: Yeah.

PS: You know, that what I mean is, there hadn't been much opportunity for a clean up.

PB: Oh God, no.

PS: You saw it pretty much...

PB: Oh, they were still, they were huggin' and kissin' us and we were feedin' 'em, and, what it was is everybody, the infantry, the tank corps, everybody was just sick at their stomach. You know, nobody could believe that...

PS: Yeah.

PB: ...anybody could treat another human being like this. I mean, I was a young kid and we got in fights, you know, in this neighborhood, and we've, you know, we'd play cowboys and Indians, maybe tie a kid to the pole and...

PS: Yeah.

PB: ...maybe on mischief night pour a little shaving cream in his head, but we never did atrocities, you know. Nobody would ever think of, maybe you'd see something in a horror movie like this and it'd scare the heck out of you when you're a kid. But, when you see this with your own eyes, you just couldn't...

PS: Yeah.

PB: Believe that mankind could treat another human being this way.

PS: Phil, now what you saw was actually only one of many, many concentration camps, and the dead that you saw were just, well, what I'm getting at, did you in your wildest imagination dream that this was just a very, very small part of the overall atrocity picture? You saw...

PB: Well we didn't get any word of the atrocities all through Germany...

PS: Yeah.

PB: ...until we were in Czechoslovakia. We had been sent down, we were doin' moppin', and moppin' up, see. Now, Erfurt was a city of flowers, and then we went in at different cities that were still holdin' out. And then they sent us down into Pilsen, Czechoslovakia. And what we were sent down there for is to get the heavy equipment out, machinery and everything. We had no idea that the Russians were takin' over all these towns that we had captured. Now, I think we coulda went all the way further and went in further into Germany...

PS: Yeah.

PB: But we don't know whether General Montgomery was holdin' back, but they held gas back on us.

PS: Yeah.

PB: We were really movin'. And we didn't get the gas supply because we coulda really moved a lot faster than the Russians were movin'. But we don't know whether

somebody was after headlines or what, but they finally slowed us down and sent us, instead of goin' to the Elbe River, they sent us down into Czechoslovakia. And we got this heavy equipment and we moved it out on flatbed trucks. What it was is our officers in headquarters knew that the Russians were gonna take over these sections. It musta been all divided up ahead of time, you know? You know, where...

PS: [unclear], during that period, you still didn't realize the tremendous scope...

PB: No, no.

PS: Of what later became known as the Holocaust?

PB: No, never, never, never had no idea that...

PS: And you saw...

PB: ...like places like Auschwitz and things were...

PS: Yeah.

PB: We never knew anything like that existed.

PS: So...

PB: There was, this was a pinnacle of degradation. I mean...

PS: Yeah.

PB: Who would ever think that anybody could...

PS: So when you saw Buchenwald and the atrocities there, you didn't realize in any way that this was just one small part...

PB: Yeah, we had no idea.

PS: ...of the overall picture of...

PB: Right.

PS: ...the Holocaust?

PB: But you know what really surprised me is that this, to find out that there was Germans in there too. I mean we were really surprised.

PS: Oh yes, yes.

PB: But, most of them were speakin' Polish, see, cause some of the Polish fellows in our outfit could speak Polish. And we had some Italians with, speakin', there were Spanish in there. But most of 'em that were, were Ukrainian, and of Jewish extraction, and Polish, and German. And some of them had work duties, and that's how they survived. They had different assignments, you know what I mean?

PS: Yeah.

PB: They would take the people to the crematories, to bury them and things. And they survived. And they were probably the ones that were very lucky.

PS: Yeah, and how the...

PB: And I don't know how many went through there and got executed. I don't know.

PS: Oh, thousands.

PB: But they told us that...

PS: And had liberation been another month or two later, probably thousands more would have died.

PB: Oh sure.

PS: Phil, did the experience of seeing the horrors and the prisoners have any effect on your feeling about being part of the war and fighting Germany?

PB: In what respect do you mean?

PS: Well, you knew, I think you, while you were fighting you had a pretty good idea of what you were fighting for.

PB: Oh sure.

PS: Did this in any way show you, say, what you were fighting against? In other words, you were fighting for, we all know what. Did this show you that you were fighting, also fighting against probably the most vicious bunch of maniacs, of genocidal monsters that ever existed?

PB: Yeah, well, we realized after we seen the things, you know, we knew they were good soldiers. We knew they were tough. Now some that we had captured, you know, like back in France and everything, they were telling us--they could speak English, like in Koblenz, the officers--that they were glad that it was over. They wanted no part but they were conscripted and everything. Well, they were telling us and they said that they were glad to see Hitler coming to his knees. And then when we get into Germany, as we crossed the Rhine River, we found that the people weren't as nice as so many soldiers we had captured. Some of them were really happy, and one general, when we were goin' up the Brittany Peninsula, even tapped one of our soldiers. And he surrendered almost the whole division. And we couldn't tell him that we were only 550 men. But we did get in touch with headquarters there. And, but you would take, when we got into Germany, we found out that the people became more harder, and bitter. They seemed like the ones that were the holdouts. You follow me, Phil?

PS: Oh sure.

PB: In other words, they weren't like so many German soldiers we met. These were very bitter and, well, holdin' out, even in towns.

PS: Yes.

PB: I mean, even towns that were supposed to surrender, we had snipers pickin' at us. You know, as we got in further, deeper into Germany...

PS: Yeah, this was after...

PB: ...it must have been more...

PS: After you crossed the Rhine.

PB: After the Rhine River. Very, a lot of them very bitter. And, well, I found this out, you know?

PS: Even though for all intents and purposes at that point the war was lost.

PB: The war was lost.

PS: But they still believed...

PB: But they still held out, yeah.

PS: Well they were told, I know we, our contact with German civilians, a lot of them told us that they were still being fed propaganda.

PB: Oh sure.

PS: That we had overextended ourselves.

PB: Yeah.

PS: We had overextended our supply lines.

PB: Yeah.

PS: And any minute, you know, it was gonna turn again in Germany's favor.

PB: Yeah. Well, you know, some of them were very bitter that a lot of the cities were targeted, and a lot of the civilians were bombed and the factories were saved. And I said, "That's T.S." And they wanted to know what T.S. was.

PS: Yeah.

PB: And I said, "Tough Shit," because, "You bombed England and you bombed all these other cities..."

PS: Sure.

PB: "And you didn't care about the civilians there."

PS: They were very...

PB: So they didn't want to hear that.

PS: Yeah, they were very, very bitter about the...

PB: Oh, sure.

PS: ...bombing of the Americans.

PB: Yeah.

PS: I know in some places in Germany when the American bombers were shot down, usually the...

PB: They didn't [unclear].

PS: The crew was not...

PB: Taken care of.

PS: Not too well, no.

PB: No.

PS: Their--what they had, what they hoped for the most was that they would be captured by the German Army...

PB: Yes.

PS: ...before the civilians...

PB: Before the civilians got them.

PS: ...got to them.

PB: Yeah, we noticed that when I got into Germany. We ran into a lot of bitter ones, you know?

PS: Would you say that just about all the men in your outfit, they acted pretty much the same as you did?

PB: Yeah, they were all bewildered, I'd say.

PS: How long did you remain in Buchenwald?

PB: Just two days, that's all. Maybe three, I can't remember. See, I--with a war, you can't go back...

PS: Yeah, I know.

PB: You know how you...

PS: Yeah.

PB: You never keep track of anything, because you're constantly, what we were constantly watching for is, you're always on a, your eye, you're right now is hunting season for deer. You always got your ears and eyes open. You never know when you're gonna get-

Tape one, side two:

PS: Side two, Phil Solomon interviewing Mr. Philip Bonner. You were saying, Mr. Bonner? I've just asked you, well you were s-, mentioning about conditions when we completed the other side.

PB: Right.

PS: To continue, I had just asked you how long you remained in the camp, and has it had any influence on your thinking as you look back on it?

PB: Well, my nerves were shot after the war.

PS: Yeah.

PB: And I was in a hospital there for about a month. And I did receive what they call shock treatment, you know, after the war. Yeah, I was in a Veteran's Hospital.

PS: And you would say that that was due to your own personal experiences in combat...

PB: Yeah, in combat.

PS: As well as what you saw...

PB: Yeah.

PS: So that this was all...

PB: But this was all built up when I went back to make up my high school credits, and went to the University of Pennsylvania. And my nerves cracked. You know, I just, I think it all piled up and I had what they called a slight nervous breakdown.

PS: I hate to ask you this...

PB: Yeah?

PS: But I myself, you went through pretty much the same experience.

PB: Yeah.

PS: Do you still have remembrance, recollections of this? Does it go through your mind or...

PB: Yeah, but not as, as the years go on not as vivid as I did the first ten years.

PS: But you can still...

PB: I even had bad dreams and...

PS: Yeah.

PB: Bad things, I, yeah, like a, friends dyin'. I had, one of my best friends died beside me in the Battle of the Bulge, beside me. We played football together, but he was a much better football, he made All Public for John Bartram in 1942. His name was Joe Collins. We went to West Catholic. And we couldn't make the team, because you had to be real big. And we were small. We went to this new high school called John Bartram High School. And he made the team, and I went back to West Catholic. And he made All Public. And we were like brothers together. And when shrapnel took his head off that kind of...

PS: Ohh.

PB: ...made my nerves, the shrapnel just took his head off in the Battle of the Bulge.

PS: So this did stay with you...

PB: Yeah, for...

PS: For...

PB: Quite a few years.

PS: A long period of time.

PB: Yeah, yeah, about 15, 20 years.

PS: Did you talk much? Again, you know, I...

PB: Not when I first came back...

PS: Don't like to...

PB: No.

PS: Yeah.

PB: And I think after 20 years I did. I started to tell people. As a matter of fact I lost a lot of these pictures. When I had the reunion, this fellow lent me these pictures. I mailed him these, and you seen where I had some saved.

PS: Yeah.

PB: And as a matter of fact, I had one where a Messerschmidt was shot down in Germany. And a, I'm standing there and I got a German paratrooper jacket on, and I got two pistols. I had a P-38 and a Luger on each side. And my dad had sent me cigars. And I had these put away down our cellar back over a little street over here I used to live, called Eden Street. And a sewer pipe broke. I made seats over top [unclear], and I didn't realize it, and it ruined a lot of these pictures I had.

PS: Oh.

PB: And I...

PS: That's...

PB: I was, and I, this fellow let me at the reunion take these pictures, because I mailed them to him, and he, I gotta mail these back to him. So, this is the ones at Buchenwald, all right. But I did want that one standin' [chuckling], it looked like I had shot the plane down! Well, it was still smokin'. But I didn't shoot it down. It got shot down. But it landed in a field and I had my picture taken on the wing of it.

PS: And you do not mourn the loss.

PB: Right, oh, I did. I kind of a, to me that was a, sort of a picture and a half.

PS: Did your, can you explain in any way in your own mind the German decisions that led to the setting up of concentration camps and this horrible atrocities committed on fellow humans in...

PB: I have no idea what would go through a man's mind to do things like this. He had to be a real sick man. You know, I mean, he had to be possessed, as we would say in the goy faith, in Christian faith...

PS: Yes.

PB: He was possessed by the devil. You know, he must have been. You know, I mean, nobody could, how could anybody do anything like this to a human being? Not one, but thousands and thousands of people. I mean, how did that man sleep at night?

PS: And this was...

PB: You know?

PS: And here was a country, too, that was deep in religion...

PB: Oh very deep, beautiful churches.

PS: Yeah.

PB: As a matter of fact, in our religion, we took food over to a woman, and I used to tell the wife about her. And this fellow says to me, "Let's go over and see Theresa Newman." So I thought it was a girl. So we're--we had some chocolate bars, you know how, and these little packs of cigarettes. Remember the ones, the little ones they gave...

PS: Yeah, the, with rations...

PB: So I had to hand him some oranges and we happened to get some sugar. And I thought we're going to go to see a German broad [chuckling]. You know, and we hadn't touched any because they were, they had no soap or anything. But he said, "This Theresa Newman's somethin' special." So we get in a jeep and we go and see her. Here it's a woman who has a, the marks, we call them stigs, stigmata.² She said she lives on the Holy Eucharist and water. So I thought she was B.S.'n us. But we couldn't touch her. We talked to her through an interpreter. And she told us, "The German people are hungry. Take the food to them." So we had these, remember the ten-in-one rations?

PS: Oh sure.

PB: And the K rations?

PS: Yeah.

PB: So we distribute them to the German people, and a priest told us that he had five priests that got put in Buchenwald that were executed--five priests. So, he didn't care about religion or nothin'. And they say he was...

PS: Oh no, there were many...

PB: They say he was a Catholic years ago, that nut. He was a paperhanger or something, wasn't he?

PS: Yeah, he started like as a painter³ and...

PB: Yeah.

PS: ...paperhanger.

PB: Yeah. I don't know what faith he was, if he was a Catholic, but they say he was a Christian.

PS: Oh yes, yes.

² Sensation of pain corresponding to crucifixion wounds of Jesus.

³ Hitler initially supported himself by selling his paintings. He was rejected twice from the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts. (*Hitler's Vienna: A Dictators Apprenticeship* by Brigitte Hamann, 1999).

PB: And he would do this to his own people too, I mean, put priests. You'd think he would have respect for religion.

PS: See, I've read that he believed that he himself had the power of God.

PB: Did he?

PS: That people, when he conquered the world, that he would be the deity himself, that he would be God that people...

PB: See?

PS: ...would...

PB: Well there's all kinds of bed bugs...

PS: ...be worshiping.

PB: ...like that. I can't, Phil, I just feel, I just can't imagine how man can create in the back of their mind to do things against men that way. You know?

PS: Now, for many, for a long time, you really couldn't speak about it.

PB: No.

PS: Do you feel now the compulsion that we who were witness...

PB: Right.

PS: ...should, really should speak about it because...

PB: Definitely.

PS: Even while there are now, say a half a million witnesses who saw this...

PB: Yes, right.

PS: ...already there are the, those who claim that it never happened.

PB: Who? Who've seen it? My God!

PS: No, no, no, no, not those who saw it.

PB: Oh.

PS: No, I mean like neo-Nazi...

PB: Oh, these younger generation in Ger-...

PS: You know, the skinheads...

PB: Oh. Oh.

PS: These...

PB: [unclear].

PS: You know, supremacist organizations.

PB: Yes, yeah, yeah.

PS: And if they have the guts to disclaim that it ever happened, while we and maybe a half a million others are still living who actually saw it...

PB: Right.

PS: And the German government itself is providing all the facts and figures, and admitting to every part of the Holocaust.

PB: Right.

PS: They have provided Gratz College, our Holocaust Archive Department, with books documenting all peoples who were taken from their homes and transported out of their hometowns. So...

PB: Well...

PS: ...even the German government admits to all of this.

PB: Well, see, don't you think, Phil, that this was built up over the years? See, they had come from what you call a Prussian people, and their, they used to be warriors, you know?

PS: Yeah.

PB: And they're very militaristic. You know, and he just got in there at the time we were sufferin' in this country too, a Depression, see.

PS: Yeah.

PB: And the country was probably poor, and he came along, and he got this government goin', and he started this Stormtrooper stuff, what they call the SS, you know?

PS: Yeah.

PB: And he had this party, and what he did is he just grew it up over night, like a mushroom.

PS: Yeah, it started with a little handful.

PB: A little handful.

PS: And...

PB: And he got so big so fast.

PS: Germany was just ripe.

PB: Just ripe at the time, yeah.

PS: After you left Buchenwald...

PB: Because we had some German fellows in our outfit. They were very good, you know...

PS: Oh yes, yeah.

PB: An interpreter and everything. And man, they hated Hitler with a passion. He says, "You know, it's givin' our people a bad name." We had Germans in our outfit. You know, they used them to try to decipher or when we got prisoners to talk to them. You know, so...

PS: Was there any...

PB: You know, not all the German people were that bad, you know. It's like anybody.

PS: Oh sure.

PB: We got, like I'm part Irish and part Swedish. We got bastards in our family line.

PS: Oh in all, in mine and everybody...

PB: Oh, you find 'em, sure, everybody.

PS: Everybody else's.

PB: But see how this nut got into power, my God, I can't figure it out. He's nothing but a two-bit wallpaper guy. How he got in power I don't know. He must have been brilliant to take over. The power of the country must have been really weak at the time, don't you think, Phil?

PS: Yeah, I guess Germany, see they, I think they too, not that I'm a historian, but I think they blamed a lot of their difficulties on the penalties inflicted on them as a result of losing World War I.

PB: I heard this, yeah. I heard this.

PS: And I think by World War II they, I don't think they in any way conceived that they could possibly lose the war, and they would regain...

PB: The world.

PS: Everything, the world.

PB: Just think...

PS: Do you know if...

PB: ...if that nut woulda got a hold of the A-bomb, eh?

PS: Oh, my.

PB: Oh, he woulda wiped us out.

PS: And he wasn't...

PB: You know, we did capture some towns that were in a cave, that they were supposed to be makin' this heavy water. And I didn't know what the hell heavy water was. I heard 'em talkin' about it. One time we were down in Tennessee takin' maneuvers. And we had to guard a plant called Oak Ridge. And I heard they were makin'...

PS: Yeah, that's Oak Ridge. I remember...

PB: Yeah, you remember that?

PS: The name. Well, I remember the, you know, Oak Ridge⁴...

PB: Yeah.

PS: In Tennessee.

PB: And we were guardin' that for about a week one time. We had to guard that one night when we were on maneuvers.

PS: Do you know if the experience your outfit had with Buchenwald, do you know if that became a part of your regimental history? The book you have is that mentioned? The book...

PB: Yeah, the 159th.

PS: All your engineer...

PB: Yeah. It does have it here on a map as a, right here, see we have all the, see this little, where the heck's this little map? It's drawn where we all were travelin'. See, we were the first outfit to break through the German lines in Saint Lô [France]. See, here we are pinned down. This is what we used to do, open up these road blocks.

PS: Yeah.

⁴ Oak Ridge, TN was the base for the Manhattan Project that developed the atomic bombs.

PB: See? This was that Company A, that was our Company, at Saint-Malo [France]. We were pinned down here, but we had to blow these apart to keep the army goin'. We did lose through snipers. You see here? This was out in a, see how they used to put the railroad ties in the water?

PS: Oh yeah, yeah.

PB: So we used to get, see this is a mine detector. Now here we are, the ones, you know, and this is right before we went across at Boppard. See them all kneelin' there?

PS: Oh yeah.

PB: They, now these boats came up, but they came up three days later. The Navy brought them up. We had already had the Army in, the 87th across. The Navy was supposed to bring. Now they woulda got hit. They were that high. We had these, you ever see these little fishin' boats...

PS: Oh yeah, this is...

PB: ...they sell in Sears?

PS: Yes.

PB: Well that's what we went across in. And we, they wanted us to take motors. But we wanted to go across real quiet the Mose-, eh, Rhine River. But I think the Germans were signaling, because as we started to go across with the infantry, we had paddles, and then they put on mae west [inflatable life jacket]. Remember they used to call these?

PS: Yeah, the "Mae West".

PB: The "Mae West"...

PS: Were the beachheads established when you put the bridge in?

PB: No, we established the beachhead.

PS: Yeah.

PB: We established it. But we went across at night, and these bells started to go off on these barges that were sunk, these coal barges. And they all started to go along simultaneously. And some one hollered out, "There musta be, there, or a signal on the other side." We said, "Oh, no, no, no, we don't need--they can't even see us." We had our faces all dark and we had the infantry in front. And we're paddlin' across. And you know, the current's pretty...

PS: Oh I know when we crossed the Rhine...

PB: Yeah!

PS: I [unclear].

PB: Oh, that current was wicked. So, when we crossed at night, we took this 87th across. All of a sudden we're out in the middle and these flares shot up, just like daylight.

PS: German flares?

PB: German flares! And they took their time comin' down.

PS: Yeah. While, it was [unclear].

PB: And, oh, I knew we were done, but the only thing that saved us is they set their guns back in the [unclear] too high. And the bullets were ricocheting off the road. And we were low enough. Now these here comin' up, that would have been just high enough. We woulda caught them.

PS: Eh, Phil...

PB: But, we do mention in this map here where Buchenwald is, and let me show you the map, okay? Now where, what the heck did I do with the map? Here's our map of our outfit here. See, here's pictures of Buchenwald.

PS: Yeah. Mmm hmm.

PB: You see, these are other pictures of bodies.

PS: Oh, that's in your...

PB: That's in our book, yeah.

PS: Yeah.

PB: *We Saw Germany* see, the trucks [unclear].

PS: That is mentioned and also photographed and...

PB: Oh yeah.

PS: Phil, how long did you remain in Europe after the war ended?

PB: What we did, Phil, is that they took us back to a town called Antwerp.

PS: In...

PB: In Belgium.

PS: Belgium.

PB: And we used to go in the morning with our trucks, and the British were up there. And we used to get 25 to each man. I'd have 25 prisoners. And I would have them all day. And we would go to this compound and put them on the trucks. And I'd have a pistol and a carbine.

PS: These were German prisoners of war?

PB: German prisoners, right. Now they didn't want to escape, because the war's over. What good would it do?

PS: Yeah, there's no place...

PB: No place to go, and they were eatin' good. And we built what they call Nissen Huts. They would dig out the dirt...

PS: Yeah.

PB: And then put in a foundation and put in a pipe for the plumbing, and then put some bolts up where they could put the beams. Then a, in two days they could put a Nissen Hut [prefabricated shelter of corrugated iron with a cement floor] up, 25 men. And that's what we did. We built a camp what they call a dedownbarkation [phonetic] camp. They come back with all the tanks and the jeeps, and they'd leave them in the fields. And we would build this camp. It was called Prince Tophat, you know? You know?

PS: Yeah, we did exactly, we were...

PB: You did the same thing too?

PS: We were scheduled for re-deployment to the Pacific.
PB: Oh, were ya?
PS: So we left our entire squadron of armored vehicles...
PB: Yeah.
PS: Hundreds of, you know, tanks, armored cars...
PB: The top hats?
PS: The top hats.
PB: [unclear].
PS: No, this was at...
PB: Oh, probably down in France.
PS: No, we left all the vehicles at Metz.
PB: Oh did you, at Metz.
PS: And then we were taken from Metz by a long line of trucks...
PB: Yeah.
PS: ...into Le Havre...
PB: Oh, okay.
PS: For embarkation.
PB: Oh, I see.
PS: Well, during the period that you were there...
PB: Yes.
PS: ...did you witness the handling of any of these concentration camp survivors?
PB: They treated them, I think, with the greatest of care. They were so worried that they were losin' 'em. See, they were losin' 'em through us feedin' 'em. You follow me?
PS: Yeah.
PB: And the medics and everybody moved up. And Patton came up and all kinds of photographers, and everything come up. In other words, the camp was just a Mecca of people, you couldn't believe, like in a matter of days.
PS: Yeah.
PB: The place was just nothin' but...
PS: While you were...
PB: They, but when we were there, they were, they treated the prisoners the best they could.
PS: Yeah.
PB: They didn't realize it there, but they gave us hell. The medics gave or chewed our, what we call chewed our ass out. "You dumb son of a bitch," they would say. Well how the heck did we know?
PS: But they didn't, sure.
PB: When someone's hungry, you oughta feed him.
PS: A lot of doctors, a lot of doctors did the same thing.

PB: Sure, we didn't know.
PS: They didn't...
PB: But see, what they had to do, is they had to give them soft diets, I guess like soft bread and soft soups.
PS: Some they were so far gone...
PB: Yeah.
PS: ...they had to feed them...
PB: Oh yeah.
PS: ...quite a few intravenously and...
PB: Well you know what I seen too, Phil? They were huggin' and kissin' and some of them had human waste around their mouths.
PS: Yeah.
PB: That, to stay alive, they were eatin' anything, Jesus, God! I mean they, could you? See, this must have been the plane I was tellin' you about I had a...
PS: Oh, yeah...
PB: A picture on, see? Remember...
PS: Phil, we've covered just about all the...
PB: Okay.
PS: ...questions that I had in mind. Would you like to add anything at all to what we have discussed?
PB: No, what I would like to see, if this is going to be going in the archive or anything, is that this should go down in history that this should never happen to a human being again in the life.
PS: Well...
PB: I think the world should be smart enough to know that nobody should be that powerful that, to do atrocities like this again.
PS: Well, let us...
PB: Nobody.
PS: ...hope and pray.
PB: Let's hope and pray, yeah.
PS: Yeah. Well, Phil, on behalf of Gratz College, and the Holocaust Oral History Archive...
PB: Yeah. Where is that located anyway?
PS: In Melrose Park.
PB: Oh, is it?
PS: Old York Road, just above Cheltenham Avenue.
PB: Oh is it? Okay.
PS: In Melrose Park.
PB: Yeah, I know.
PS: Well, on behalf of...

PB: I used to go there to the Justice of the Peace Book Shop that way.
PS: Oh, oh...
PB: And my brother-in-law was in the Navy. He had a little store up in Abington
up that way.
PS: Yeah, that's quite a bit further up.
PB: Yeah, oh, is it up there? Okay.
PS: Yeah. Well, on behalf of Gratz College I want to thank you very much...
PB: Oh, you're quite welcome.
PS: ...for your very valuable and friendly testimony.
PB: Okay. You're welcome.
PS: Now thanks a million, Phil.
PB: Okay, Phil. Right.