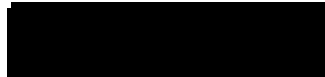


Ninth Interview—World War II Veteran and Liberator

Jesse Oxendine



Born July 20, 1926, Pembroke, NC

Religious and ethnic background: Baptist. Native American (Lumbee) and Alaskan

Date of Interview: November 20, 2006      Location: Temple Emanuel, Greensboro, NC  
Conducted by Marcia Horn                      Videographer: Alan Gleiner

325<sup>th</sup> Glider Infantry Regiment, 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division

Liberated Wöbbelin concentration camp

Good conduct medal and Bronze Star

Occupational and Victory medal, Combat Infantry

Listed in Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress

Jesse Oxendine was drafted by the Army September 15, 1944 at age eighteen and served until 1946. His three brothers also served in the Army (one brother flew 25 missions) and all returned home safely. In his youth, Jesse attended Native American schools through high school in Pembroke, NC. Native American and white schools and churches were separate. In his youth, Jesse played Cowboys and Indians with his friends; they all wanted to be cowboys. Jesse worked at a local theater in high school. He was only in eleventh grade when he was drafted into the infantry. Most of his friends also served in the military, and Jesse was eager to serve.

At eighteen, not long after he was drafted, Jesse was put in charge of a platoon of 48 men. One of his most memorable experiences was when he and his regiment came across the labor camp in Wöbbelin, Germany, across from the Elbe River, near the town of Ludwigslust, on May 1-2, 1945. Jesse had never heard of concentration camps. Neither he nor his regiment—even the company commander-- had any preparation for what they would find. Someone from his regiment said, "I heard they might be Jews." Jesse asked, "What's with the Jews?" He did not know about anti-Semitism. In the camp he saw three furnaces and wondered "What were they going to heat all that water for?" The first hour, Jesse and his regiment were in shock. He wondered what was going on. They "weren't supposed to see this in war."

At first he saw little movement, and when he saw the prisoners, in striped pajamas, they looked like skeletons. Many were barely alive. One man was sitting up and staring straight ahead; he had died with his eyes open. Jesse saw young boys, maybe fifteen years old, but no young children. There were some women, who looked better fed than the men, who were emaciated and starving to death. The only food was Irish potatoes, which had been dumped in a courtyard. Jesse doesn't know how many actually survived.

There were brick buildings with broken windows. Inside the main barracks, Jesse saw straw on the floor, a trough, and lots of barbed wire. There were no gas chambers, but there was a crematorium. Barbed wire was used in the bedsprings. At one part of the camp there was a round hole and a pole with barbed wire, which may have been used for punishment. Some German guards were still present and tried to disguise themselves. Jesse's unit put those they took with other German prisoners; other guards fled.

Although Jesse's regiment had rations, it was important to provide the prisoners no solid food early but just gradually later on. Large portions of solid food could be fatal. Jesse was in Wobbelin most of the day, and later his battalion was met by the Russians, who set up roadblocks.

After liberation, Jesse went to Ludwigslust; 260 burnt bodies had been brought from Wobbelin. The townspeople were required to dig 260 graves and witness the burials. (The camp was exposed to the main road, so the local townspeople could not have been totally unaware of what was happening at Wobbelin.) Overall, the local people showed no remorse. One or two women were crying. German officers were also made to witness the bodies and burials. Newsmen were sprayed with DDT. (See also the Second Interview and James Bryant's account of Wobbelin.)

Another vivid memory stayed with Jesse. After liberation, someone had thrown a raw egg from a window of a multi-story building. The egg landed on the pavement, and Jesse saw a recently liberated prisoner pick up the raw egg and bits of shell. Jesse watched the prisoner carefully eat the raw egg, shell and all, from the pavement.

When Jesse returned from the war, he and his brothers didn't discuss it much with his parents. A first cousin had been killed in Normandy and had been buried at Omaha Beach.

Much later, in 1994, Jesse and his wife returned to Ludwigslust. The German townspeople welcomed them. He also visited the gravesite. This same year, Jesse remembers sitting at a table and talking with a young German girl, eighteen or nineteen, born after the war. They kept in touch. One year later, that girl came to the U.S. with some friends, who spent a week with Jesse in Lake Norman, NC.

This particular war experience was one of the most memorable in Jesse's life. Now he and his friend Henry Hirschmann, a Jewish Holocaust survivor also from Charlotte, visit and share their past experiences with high school students and church groups. Jesse owns a film of Wobbelin's liberation, which he and Henry share with the students. Jesse emphasizes the importance of showing historical films. He also has many photos of Berlin's liberation and Goering's headquarters. He urges others with war experiences to make tapes and record their memories.

At the time he was eighteen, Jesse wished he had known more about what part of history he had witnessed. When he saw films of the Nuremberg trials especially, he began to

realize the scope of some of the horrors he had witnessed and the millions—Jews and others—murdered.

Jesse would remind Holocaust deniers especially of Eisenhower's visit to one of the devastated camps [Ohrdruf, April 1945] at liberation, where Eisenhower passionately urged civilians and army personnel, as well as forces in the immediate area, to witness the devastation he had witnessed. Jesse warns of the danger of standing on the sidelines. He recorded one brother's experiences in the military and gave the recording to his brother's children. Jesse has numerous albums, scrapbooks, and letters from his war experience.

Thoughts about some of the implications of war have troubled Jesse. Many of the German soldiers targeted were originally farm boys. In the army he was trained to kill—to "get a German." Jessie has thought about how we can be coaxed into thinking like that. He himself didn't kill anyone, but he did search the dead. One German soldier had a billfold with a picture of his family. Jesse reflected, "This man was someone's father. Who was he?"

Jesse is concerned that present-day TV has made war popular. His comment from experience—including reflections on the war in Iraq—is that "war is hell." Reflecting on his war experiences, Jesse believes strongly that we need to "learn how to talk.... We pray to God, but we need to talk with our neighbors."