

**Atlanta History Center  
John Glustrom**

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FREDERICK WALLACE: Today is Wednesday, June 18, 2003. This is the beginning of an interview with Mr. John Glustrom. Mr. Glustrom is a Veteran of World War II and he saw service with the U.S. Army Engineers in England, France, and Germany during the periods from January 1941 to January 1946. The interview is being conducted at the Atlanta History Center in Atlanta, Georgia. My name is Frederick Wallace. I'm with AARP, and I am going to be the interviewer.

Mr. Glustrom, as I briefed you earlier, this is your story. We want you to tell it in your own words. Take us from the day of your enlistment into the service, tell us why you enlisted, and your experience during your days in boot camp or basic training, and take us all the way through step by step until your date of separation. So, Mr. Glustrom, will you begin, please?

JOHN GLUSTROM: Thank you. I have to say to begin with that there's a thread going through this narration, a thread of fortunate events that occurred in time to keep me living through the war. Many things have happened that just by a thread changed the course of my life and kept me going, though I was never wounded or injured except getting a bad case of poison ivy from going to sleep in the woods without light. Time after time very important events occurred through which I was kept alive because my service was advanced beyond a front line as it might be called and in front of the tanks many times without protection of armed troops.

And with that, I'll go into the narration. I was drafted one year before Pearl Harbor. In fact, my bags were packed on the company street waiting for discharge when the Japanese took their terrible action in Pearl Harbor. And in the course of my initial time in the military I went through several units. One unit I was transferred out of was the

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field artillery, and that field artillery later I found went to Africa and suffered enormous casualties in Africa, but I was put into the engineers and my job was to help form and train the 333<sup>rd</sup> Engineering Regiment.

FREDERICK WALLACE: Could I back you up for just a minute?

JOHN GLUSTROM: Sure.

FREDERICK WALLACE: Where did you go for basic training after you were enlisted?

JOHN GLUSTROM: That was a --

FEMALE SPEAKER: In South Carolina.

JOHN GLUSTROM: Notable point, I went to South Carolina, but I never had hardly any basic training and so I survived without it.

FREDERICK WALLACE: Just a moment. Yes, go ahead. [RECORDING CUTS OFF TEMPORARILY] Okay.

JOHN GLUSTROM: I was in the artillery, and as I said, I was transferred out. The reason I was transferred out was that I had gotten a real desirable job working through for a Regimental Colonel and he kept me out of basic training and kept me out of company duties in order to take over his headquarters. And by not having company duties I became sort of a bad element in the company, because everybody else was jealous. And so, one morning I was allowed to go to Atlanta. I had a weekend pass from South Carolina, Camp Claiborne and every weekend a permanent pass and it was the kind of pass that did not endear me to the Regiment, the men who were doing the dirty work to keep the Regiment going, taking care of the kitchen and the latrine.

And so, one morning about five o'clock I came back from Atlanta with a load

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men, which I took with me and found I had been transferred. And I asked what happened to the Colonel and they said he had been sent to an officer's training course himself, and he could not longer prevent my being put out. And so, that was, as I said, one of the best things that happened because the artillery unit had tremendous casualties in Africa. And our casualties in the engineers were relatively light, but it did save my life.

During the course of the time I spent in the artillery, which was well over a year I never got promoted past Private. And then when I got into the engineering outfit I began going through a series of promotions until I made Master Sergeant. As Master Sergeant I was somewhat my own boss, and I decided to stay as Master Sergeant until we were going to be sent overseas. And I got an opportunity to be made into Warrant Officer in the same Regiment at the same position I was doing this Master Sergeant. And my job was to see that the Regiment had food and clothing and ammunition and things that they needed when they needed it. And I made contact with all sorts of sources of supply.

And an interesting thing happened in the engineers, another event for which I as very fortunate. We were sent to Death Valley for training. The purpose of it was in Death Valley to prepare for Africa service. And in Africa things were very, very uncertain and dangerous. The Rommel of the Germans was a very adept Commander. Any troops who opposed him had real problems. But our unit was sent to train in Death Valley and we were divided into a red army and a blue army. All the units were there training.

FREDERICK WALLACE: And Death Valley, you mean Death Valley, California?

JOHN GLUSTROM: In the United States.

FEMALE SPEAKER: Yeah, that would be in California.

JOHN GLUSTROM: California and New Mexico and Oregon, you know, and – it's an extensive dessert through many states. And we had – there, you know, the temperature was 110 or 115 during the day and it would go down near to freezing at night. And we always had to get into a sleeping bag and hope that a rattlesnake was not in there waiting for us.

But they divided us into a red army and blue army and the blue army was my organization. And everything was going pretty well with us in the maneuvers until one night the red army people stormed into our headquarters and stole our battle plans, and from then on we were severely trounced in the maneuvers and the red army was sent to Africa. And as a result, I found out later on leave in Paris that the red army suffered over 80% casualties in Africa because they weren't really adept at anything but breaking and entering.

And that, of course, I think was one of the things that saved my life. And when I was made an officer before going overseas that gave me a much better lifestyle and situation as an individual soldier for service in strange lands, and I was suddenly transformed from an enlisted man to an officer. In those days it was a very, very different role and lifestyle, and I had to learn to live the officer core, eat with them, sleep along side of them, and generally be one of them and have the officer's duties in additions to the duties I had as a Master Sergeant.

The first place overseas we were sent was to England, and that was during the bombing raids. I don't know how many people realize, but England was almost bombed out of existence during World War II. And if they had been we would most likely have lost that war. I was there many times during the bombing raids. I once had a weekend

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leave to London and several bombing raids took place every night; two nights I was there. In fact, the people were so immune to the effects of the bombs that they would go outside their places where they were and look up to watch the lights of any aircraft fire and the planes dropping the bombs and there was black falling all over the streets, and they would stand foolishly and endanger their own lives from flack, which could easily kill them. The effects of the bombs really almost destroyed England as a fighting force, and it was during that time that America got into the Lend-Lease program and began to help supply England with equipment and keep them going, because Roosevelt, who was President then, had the foresight to realize what was happening with England and how badly we needed them.

And then America got into the race to be the first to develop radar. We had one man here named John Lumus [phonetic] who formed a unit at his own expense with 500 physicists, and they had a location near New York City and New York State, and they developed a radar lab there. And all these physicists worked on various aspects of the radar production.

FREDERICK WALLACE: Let me take you back for a moment. Where were you based in England and what was the mission of your unit?

JOHN GLUSTROM: Our mission in England was to build barracks and hospitals for incoming American troops and expected casualties from American soldiers.

[RECORDING CUTS OUT TEMPORARILY] The first place we were sent into England was the Salzburg plains, which is a large area in the central part of England. We never saw any towns during the day time. We would get there at night, and I got into town maybe twice during the several months. And then we went to – I got a weekend leave. I

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had to go to London to pick up some equipment – special equipment, and I got a weekend leave into London as a result of having to get that equipment. That's when I participated in these air raids.

Now, it was a very funny feeling; I picked up a girl in London, took her out to dinner and an air raid came while we were eating dinner. And the waiter came and brought all the rest of the dinner and told us he was going down to the air raid shelter. We could stay and eat if we wanted to. [LAUGHTER] And so, we tried to stay there and eat and the bombs were dropping around us and it was a very funny feeling. Our stomachs seemed to have feathers from all the danger involved of staying there and eating this delicious food in the midst of a tremendous raid that might destroy us any second. That was a brush with death. I can still feel, to this day, the effects of sitting there and those bombs dropping all around. And then when we later on looked outside the door we saw civilian Londoners ignoring the flack and walking around the street looking up in the air like it was a giant performance for their benefit.

We had the job of building these barracks and hospitals there. One of the phenomenon's that reoccurred in England at that time, in addition to sending us over to build these barracks and hospitals, they sent large numbers of American Generals and Colonels over to take over the arriving American troops. And until the troops arrived in England they had very little to do, so as a result, every two or three days one of them would be inspecting the American troops that were there. And we were there then. We got an inspection almost every day. It got so bad we couldn't do any work so we set aside Company B for inspections, and all Company B did was pick up their saw dust and pick up their scraps of wood and keep the place spotlessly clean so the Generals would have a

good report on the inspection. And nothing else got inspected but Company B.

And we had a shortage over there because the submarines were very busy sinking American supply ships and the German submarines were very deadly. And the American supply ships were going from American to England trying to avoid being sunk. In fact, when I came across the ocean it was on a converted banana boat that hauled bananas from South America to the United States, and they converted that boat to a troop ship and took my unit over in that fashion, and we were kind of crowded on that banana boat. The boats were heavily dependant on what radar we had for warning at that time, and later on we developed, through the genius of these physicists, a very, very thorough and advanced form of radar that was able to not only pinpoint weapons after we shot them but ping back that we had hit the target. And it was radar that saved England and saved us.

I might say that later on in the war there was – it was plain that American planes would do a world of bombing in Germany, and for a while they bombed civilian areas with the idea of disrupting the German war effort. And they carried on terrible bombings in German towns. The worst one was in Dresden in Germany, and I think that anybody that saw the bombing that the Germans did in England would realize that what they received in return was what they really deserved to get because of the indiscriminant bombings they themselves carried on. And so, every time someone complains to me about Dresden and the bombing of civilians and 100,000 Germans being killed in the bombing, I have to think back to the hundreds of thousands of Britain's who were killed by German bombs and how many killed us.

FREDERICK WALLACE: Were you stationed in Germany at the time?

JOHN GLUSTROM: No, I wasn't stationed any where more than a few days



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except in England. But I'll get to my German eventually. On D-Day Plus 12 I went across on Normandy Beach and when I landed off of – [RECORDER CUTS OFF TEMPORARILY] – the equipment as I took across to France was a pocket chess set and I got to play chess while we were waiting around to move. You know, they say that the Army they also serve who sit and wait, and I did my share of waiting and sitting. And so, the pocket chess set came in handy.

I had a friend, a dentist named Walter Grant that I used to play chess with and I had much fun with Walter Grant. He was what we used to call a cocksman, and he would go around picking up girls in every town wherever we stopped for a day or two. He was a magician. They called it a Presto Digit Toto [phonetic], and he used to do tricks making the little knife disappear or change colors, and he would stop a young girl on the street and show her the tricks and before long he had a whole gang of young girls following him, and other people, and he invariably would end up going with the girl to her apartment. While we were in this particular town he would spend it with companionship. He was well known for that purpose. A very nice fellow and I enjoyed many an adventure with him, although I didn't need any of his dentistry attention.

Now, I did go into France and after having three years in the military except for the time in England, which was about six or eight months, and I spent two years counting England, France, and Germany, and I went over to Normandy D plus 12 and we went over in these little boats they called ducks and when we finally got to the shore line the front of the boat let down and we marched down that ramp into the water by waist deep and had to walk up the shore. And at that time, D plus 12, the Germans had been beaten back, so they were only firing artillery and not firing machine guns at us. And we had a

job assigned to go clear the Sherbourg Harbor. Unfortunately, we had no transportation and Sherbourg Harbor had been filled with boats. We had to hike to Sherbourg, and we went all the way to hiking day and night to the limit of our endurance. There was no – at that time, no weapon vehicles to ride in, so we took forced marches night and day to get to Sherbourg. When we got there the Germans were still firing from high peaks in Sherbourg and we had to help clear the town of Germans. And then after it was clear we realized that we could not clear the harbor in time for use, and so therefore, they had to give up on the idea of using Sherbourg for a port of debarkation.

And so, we stayed there at Normandy and used Normandy Beach as a port of debarkation for supplies. Not many people realize but Normandy and Utah Beaches were massive engineering feats that were built for the purpose of invading France and then Germany. And there was storm that came up during the first few days of invasion and destroyed one of those beaches, but the other one survived and served to supply the entire American effort in France. And not many people realize that that was a thread that the American troops in France was hanging by this very thin supply line through one of the temporary beaches that were set up for supply purposes. And every GI that landed in France landed in either Normandy or Utah Beach.

Later on we went there and re-visited that beach and I was made an honorary citizen of France of Normandy Beach. And there were people swimming at the beach where we had so much misery. And I can't believe to this day that women and children were there on that beach swimming when we visited.

And so, we marched to Sherbourg a new organization was set up called the Third Army, and it was primarily tank core troops in our engineering unit. And our job with

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the tanks core was to get out ahead of them sometimes and repair damage bombed out roads and bridges so that the tanks could be supplied with food, ammunition, and gasoline, the heavy items. And we went through France and Germany, sometimes ahead of tanks and sometimes behind them but always looking for bomb damage to repair along the way. There was little, short freight trains, must have been 20 feet shorter than American freight trains, that served throughout France and Germany and they had little box cars. In fact, one of the box cars was used by General Eisenhower to haul his own private cow around so he would have fresh milk wherever we went.

And while I was in England I ran into – I was at a British supply depot hunting for special supplies for equipment and all of the sudden a jeep drove up with a 1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant and a Technical Sergeant and driver, a Corporal driver and they'd go into the supply depot and said if you got any lacquer -- and supply -- the British soldier there at the supply depot said, of course, "we have no lacquer, there's a war going on." And the American says, "Well, we got orders to get lacquer for General Patton's helmet. He takes 18 coats on each helmet." And there they were with these, in a period of short supplies, using gasoline and equipment and their own time to hunt for equipment for General Patton that he really didn't need. And later on, to show us how short supplies were, one of the inspectors came to our headquarters and he looked in our trashcans and he saw where someone had thrown away the core of an apple. He reached in the garbage can and pulled out this uneaten core of apple and he started eating it. And he said, "You should not be throwing things like this away in this shortage of equipment." But when the officer wanted lacquer for his helmet he had the time and equipment and when Eisenhower wanted the cow he had the cow.

This is a couple of interesting episodes before we landed in Omaha Beach. The first thing we saw on the shore following landing in Omaha Beach was where an American soldier – a paratrooper had been caught by the Germans and he was strung up by his feet and his throat was slit and he was left hanging there so we would see what would happen to us if the Germans caught us, to scare or frighten us, but all it did was – the word spread about it all over to every American soldier in France at that time that this was what the Germans did to the American troops. And it made us hate them with a vehement passion. It didn't not frighten us to that extent, because what happened happened to someone else, and it was not, to us, personal, but it got us very, very disturbed and angry. And our anger against the Germans lasted throughout the war. In fact, some American retired troops that had gotten out of the military and back and civilian life 40 and 60 years later can remember how deep that hatred was.

From Sherbourg we went – we were attached to the third Army and started a march through France. And once I needed some special equipment and I had to go to – I got a weekend leave to go to Paris, and in Paris my reception was like that of a hero and France couldn't do enough for us. In fact, one man coming running up to me with a 20 year aged bottle of Cognac, the best alcohol I've ever drank was that bottle of Cognac 20 years old. And I got back from Paris and continued with our march through France –

FREDERICK WALLACE: How did you get to Buchenwald?

JOHN GLUSTROM: I'm coming to that because that was deep in Germany.

FREDERICK WALLACE: Okay.

JOHN GLUSTROM: And it's a good question. Am I taking too long? I'm getting close to end. The first place we went was to Alsace-Lorraine, which was a

territory being kicked back and forth between the Germans and the French through history. And in Alsace-Lorraine, it's around the edge of Mines River, which is about 50 feet across at that place. And I went to Alsace-Lorraine and we spent the night there. The officers were quartered in with a French family or a German family. They were betwixt France and Germany so they weren't – didn't consider themselves French or German. We were supposed to take off to Germany at three o'clock in the morning. Well, it so happens that at three o'clock the Americans didn't invade across the river. They were afraid and missed their departure and about four o'clock General Patton came rushing up with his pearl revolver and his helmet with all the lacquer and every other word a cuss word. And he says, "What the hell is going on here? Why aren't you across the river?" And they said, "We're afraid, General; the Germans may be waiting right over there with machine guns pointing at us." And so, he says, I'm going across and any of you yellow belly sons of so-so want to go with me come along. So he takes off his boots and his helmet and dives into the river and swims across in the darkness, and he gets across and when he left to swim across then all the troops were shamed in the fact they didn't go across it, and they started swimming across with him. And that's the way they crossed the Rhine River and they established there was no Germans waiting for us, and they established the beach head there. And then by two, three hours they had a bridge across the river and that served to get our equipment and tanks over.

And the first town I went to with any major consequences was Frankfurt, Germany. And I had a unique experience in Frankfurt. Two soldiers and I had gone into look at various well-to-do houses and it was getting dark. The two soldiers left for the camp ground and I was there, and I came out on the town square in the dusk, and the first

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thing I saw was a group of imported laborers from east Europe who had surrounded a pretty German girl with blonde hair. They were pushing her back and forth in this circle and tearing her clothes off with the idea, undoubtedly, of gang raping her. I stepped up the circle of men and I yelled at the top of my voice and pulled out my revolver and started waving it and they released the girl and she darted off like a rabbit in a distant alley and the men dispersed who were abusing her. And I saved, in spite of my feeling against the Germans, I was still feeling that I needed to save this girl from being manhandled and brutalized. And so, I –

FREDERICK WALLACE: I'm going to stop you here. [TAPE CUTS OUT]

JOHN GLUSTROM: -- so that desire to protect a woman from being raped by this gang of laborers – the later laborers got -- the Germans had imported impressing them into duty while the Germans were fighting their soldiers and they served all the way through Germany to run the factory and produce military equipment for the German Army. And after Americans liberated Frankfurt or any other town they would be without their German masters and they would be free and they committed atrocities against the German people in repayment for what had committed against them, and so, there was a terrible situation there. It reminds me of what's happened in Iraq where the population, some of them, seem to be uprising right now at this time. Anyway, I went all the way through Germany until about 20 miles from Berlin and on the way I had to go through the Weimar Republic near the time of Weimar and I heard that that was a –

[END SIDE A]

[BEGINNING SIDE B]

JOHN GLUSTROM: -- go see it. And so, in Buchenwald there was a – it turned

out to be a concentration camp, one of the worst.

FEMALE SPEAKER: I think you [Unintelligible] because I think it's important how you –

[RECORDING CUTS OFF TEMPORARILY]

JOHN GLUSTROM: Buchenwald existed but as a soldier I didn't have any information on it. In the first place I didn't believe that the Germans could be so ruthless and brutal as to carry on an extermination camp as part of their system, and very few Americans believed they could do something like that. But when I got there I saw what they did and all of the sudden I began to believe it, that this was actually being carried on and all this brutality. And so, we came there April 11<sup>th</sup>, 1945 and there was a group of inmates in a half circle at the gate to welcome us in. They had about a 12 foot chain link fence all around the camp. And later on the tanks came and knocked the fence and the gates down.

One person in the group caught my attention. It was a 15-year-old boy – looked 15. He looked about 12 because he looked so small. And I later found out he was Ellie Weisell, the writer who had been in Buchenwald concentration camp at that time. As we approached the camp about a half mile away the odor was so horrible we almost had to turn around and didn't go to see it. And when we got to it my two companions defected out and decided not to go in. I went in to see what was going on. In the reception room they had all these lamps which the head of the camp had made out of human skin, tattooed skin as sort of introduction to this inhuman place. And then at the hospital, which the inmates took me to, it showed the inmates of the hospital in barracks; in a room about ten feet tall like this one. And the

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barracks were every two foot up the wall to the ceiling and there were sick people laying in all the bunks floor to ceiling and nobody took care of them and so many of them had diarrhea and dysentery and they would have their excrement all over the place, and that's what the smell came from.

Then further up the hill was a concentration camp – further up the hill was a crematorium and the crematorium had trailer with dead bodies outside stacked up like cord wood waiting to be cremated. They cremated – killed about 60 prisoners a day. The rest of them they worked to death. And later on in Allswidge [phonetic] I visited and found they cremated in 2500 a day in Allswidge, so it was a grand scale of what they did in Buchenwald.

But anyway, that was the highlight of my experience and by contrast to Buchenwald, the German people were rosy cheeked and well fed and looked real reasonably happy. Right with all this going on in the midst -- the staff of Buchenwald, each eight hour shift was taken into Weimar, which was the nearest town, and a new staff was brought in on those trucks to take their place. And everybody in the town knew and talked of these staff members and knew what was going on in Buchenwald. So the Germans were well aware of what was happening in their midst.

FREDERICK WALLACE: Let me ask you, how did that affect your later life?

JOHN GLUSTROM: Well, when I got out of the military I decided to try to keep that sort of thing from happening over in this country. And I got involved in January of 1946 into the Civil Rights movement in Atlanta, and I became President – Vice-President of the Urban League and I served as a volunteer with the Urban League for 20 years more or less. The service with the Urban League -- started out I was the only white and they had to get a white man. They took me probably as the lesser of the evils. So anyway, I



served with them. And I also got involved in the Gate City Day Nursery Association. I served as an officer and Board Member. And that was a nursery association in all the housing projects. And I also served with the Georgia Council on Human Relations as an officer. And my wife and I started the ACLU Chapter here in Atlanta, and we –

FEMALE SPEAKER: He integrated with help – [RECORDING CUTS OUT]

JOHN GLUSTROM: -- leading a group of the most prominent black citizens in Atlanta. They got me to come with them as their spokesman to integrated the public library, and before we went a black student would have to go and stand at the desk by the library and went and hunted the book he wanted out of the stacks. And later on, as a result of our visit, they did finally integrate the library. Then of course, the business of integrating the police force was a little bit more risky and we did get that done. But as a result of the library visit the newspaper published my name, address, and phone number on the front page and we had crosses burned on our front lawn as a result of that. And in those days, to begin with there may have been five white people involved in the Civil Rights Movement and I was one of them and my wife was another. And we became deeply involved and really whenever I see someone like you I realize, indirectly, I had a hand in your development and you've had a hand in mine.

FREDERICK WALLACE: So what would you like for the younger people of America today to know about what you experienced and how they can apply your experience to their lives?

JOHN GLUSTROM: Well, one thing about this experience is that at times it was as bad as it could get and life is so fragile even for the best of us that you need to live as though every moment was going to be your last minute.

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FREDERICK WALLACE: Very good. Well, thank you very much, Mr. Glustrom. We appreciate you sharing your experience with us.

FEMALE SPEAKER: I can tell you how I feel what it was. I think he was saved to marry me, and I would not have married him had he not had that experience. I came from Minneapolis. My parents were – their friends commiserated with them that I was going to live down south, and I said “oh, but he’s different.” And my mother said oh –

[END TAPE]

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