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Clarence H. Brockman oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, August 20, 2008

Clarence H. Brockman (Interviewee)

Michael Hirsh (Interviewer)

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[Transcriber's Note: The Interviewee's personal information has been removed, at the request of the Interviewer. This omission is indicated with ellipses.]

Michael Hirsh: Can you give me your full name?

Clarence Brockman: Clarence H. Brockman.

MH: And what's your—B-r-o-c-k-m-a-n?

CB: B-r-o-c-k-m-a-n.

MH: And what's your address?

CB: ...

MH: And your phone number.

CB: ...

MH: And your date of birth.

CB: Long time ago. (laughs)

MH: Yes, I know.

CB: June 26, 1920, 5:30 Saturday morning.

MH: Nineteen twenty?

CB: Nineteen twenty.

MH: So, you are—

CB: Eighty-eight and two months.

MH: Eighty-eight, two months. Where were you before you went in the Army?

CB: Before I went in the Army, I drove an eighteen-wheeler after I graduated high school in forty [1940]. I drove, and then I got that letter in forty-two [1942]: “Greetings.” So, I went in the 80th [Infantry] Division on July forty-two [1942]. I stayed with them ever since, until they kicked me out in October forty-five [1945].

MH: So, how did you go overseas?

CB: *Queen Mary*.

MH: Yeah. What was that trip like?

CB: Oh, up and down and around. Five and a half days; took five and a half days for us to go across.

MH: That’s moving fast.

CB: Yes.

MH: So, there was no convoy.

CB: No, no convey, because they could move thirty, thirty-five mile per—or knots, whatever you want to call it—and submarines can only go fifteen.

MH: So they could out run them. Did you believe it at the time?

CB: Huh?

MH: Did you believe it?

CB: Yeah, I believe it because they had on the ship, they had these spotters stationed all over. Their job was to look out over for a periscope. So, this Corporal Gwear I told you about before, he was a comedian. He says “Hey, Brock, look at that pipe stickin’ out of the water out there.” This limey here says, “Where?” “It’s out there.” But the wave were so big, it took the northern course, I guess, over there—that’s going up around close to Iceland, then swimming down into England, that way. And it went fast.

MH: Where’d you land?

CB: The Firth of Clyde in Scotland.

MH: And then what did they do with you?

CB: Put us on a train and sent us down to an area around Birmingham, the biggest town; it was called Ashton-in-Makerfield at Gorton Park.

MH: And when they'd finally send you to Europe?

CB: Thirty days later.

MH: This is 1940—

CB: Forty-five [1945]—I mean forty-four [1944].

MH: Forty-four [1944].

CB: Yeah, forty-four [1944] and we landed in Utah Beachhead, that's where we went in.

MH: This was after D-Day.

CB: After D-Day, it was after D-Day; we went into Utah Beach and from there on, we went down to the Mainz area where the Germans made a counter-attack of Montcourt. They tried to cut our supply lines in half, but they didn't succeed. And our first big battle was at Argentan-Falaise Gap.

MH: Say that again?

CB: Argentan-Falaise Gap. And that's where we caught something like 55,000 soldiers, Germans, completely wiped out. They caught them in this here valley. They bombed and strafed, and they—we was up on top of the hill north of the town of Argentan and the airplane spotter was up there. He's telling his artilleries, back down to these artillery men, tell them, "Fire left, fire left," and the lieutenant goin' there says, "Make up your mind." He says, "Just shoot, you'll hit something." (MH laughs) And we was a little bit worried, because when we got on land, we put our gas masks away.

MH: Why'd you do that?

CB: Everybody did. I dunno; it was too bulky to carry 'em. Big things. And here come the French people out. They got all excited and they said, "Gas! Gas!" Now, we asked, "Whaddya mean?" The guy by the name of Bertram Gay from Maine was a Frenchman. Couldn't speak English, but he could—they put him up in the Army, you know. Okay, he says, "What's the trouble?" He saw that our red grave registration was going down in that valley, pickin' up bodies, and they had gas masks on because they couldn't stand the smell. Okay? So, then he said okay.

Then from then, we started across France and was fifty miles below Paris when it was liberated. And we went straight over to the Moselle area between Nancy and Metz. And

we fought across there, getting' across that Moselle, we lost a lot of men at that river crossing, and in fact we got across that river and went up a valley and the Sergeant Boock come around and told me, "Brock, we gotta go back." I says, "Why?" He says, "Well, the Germans slipped in behind us. They slipped in behind us." Well, that's when they got into 318th's CP [command post] and practically wiped them out.

Then from there, we come back, and you know, it took us two months to get back at that area again, fighting those towns, small towns: Moselle. We went to Béchy, Maine, Faulquemont, and the river crossing there at—course, they were creeks to us, but the rain had swollen up the river. River size, (inaudible) river crossing, and they forgot to blow the bridge.

And this Major Burnett, he was a big loud-mouthed guy, and he says "Everybody up on the tanks, we're gonna cross that bridge." And he connected two 22mm shots, one in his neck and one in his chest. He lived till he got back to Division hospital. I don't know what happened to him after that. Well, then we got up to Farébersviller and we went as far east as Forbach just outside of Sarreguemines and we got put in reserve. We come back to Saint-Avold, stayed there for two weeks getting' new supplies in and refreshments from repo depot. Then we got word to go down around, just west of Bitche, Germany, and we was to go in attack across the Siegfried Line there, and where we was headed for was one of the biggest training areas of the German army. I thought, "Oh, this is gonna be murder."

Then we got the call to go to Luxembourg. And we got called to Luxembourg, went up to Luxembourg and did our fightin' up there in Luxembourg from December to January—all of January—froze my butt off. Excuse the expression, but that's exactly what it is. And I got shrapnel from tree burst. I got a hunk of shrapnel right here in my finger, right here. You can feel it right there. It's still there. That's Krupp steel. And then from there, we went northeast of Clairvaux to—what was the name of that town? Hosingen or something, the last town right there in Luxembourg. Then we got orders to go south down across, across over the river again until Saarburg.

MH: Let me ask you, at this point what did you know about the concentration camps, the death camps, did you know anything?

CB: We had no inkling whatsoever at what was going on, up to that time.

MH: How could that be? That's the part I don't understand.

CB: I don't understand it, either. Because they never told us or anything like that. All I know is that the thing was bad, about us and them too, that you didn't want to take a prisoner back in that snow, 'cause you've gotta walk them down to the prison—PW camp—and walk back. You took 'em over the hill and shot 'em. And there was quite a few of them that was shot, on both sides, more so on their side than our side. Because the order came down, we're to take prisoners now. No more shootin' 'em. Take prisoners.

Well, then, I think the first inkling we knew about concentration camps was before Buchenwald. There were several small ones in between from Kassel to the road, went out to Gera, Unna, Weimar. Weimar was—ten kilometers from there was Buchenwald.

MH: Did you see any of these small camps?

CB: Quite a few of 'em. They were small.

MH: Tell me what they looked like?

CB: They were more or less labor camps than anything else.

MH: So, as you're walking by or driving by?

CB: Walkin' by and driving by.

MH: What do you see?

CB: We saw the camps, usually the guys ahead of us would take the camp, you know, and just clean 'em up and getting the prisoners that was in there and trying to doctor them up. And you couldn't feed 'em anything, 'cause it'd kill 'em. Rich food, too much rich food was bad for 'em. And then—

MH: Did you go into any of those camps?

CB: We didn't go in those camps, no. I'll tell you, there was four of us together all the time, and then I got the job driving the three-quarter, which we stole.

MH: Who'd you steal it from?

CB: I dunno if we got that off of headquarters, division headquarters, or somebody back that line. Went back there and we didn't want to walk, so we rode.

MH: Changed the number and everything?

CB: Changed the number and everything. Wiped it off, painted it over with white camouflage paint. (laughs) We had that the rest of the—from Kassel on, all the way east to Chemnitz. And when we got to Buchenwald, Weimar, we asked the people, you know, "Where's the booze? You gotta have booze." But the people in the city did not have booze compared to what farmers had. So, you went out to a farm and they always made schnapps.

MH: So, this is you're four guys in the truck.

CB: One guy was Pete Siberelli, from Altoona [Pennsylvania]; the other guy was Harry Billman from Williamsport, PA; the other guy was Harry Eckrel from Baltimore [Maryland]. I think they're all dead now.

MH: What was your rank at that time?

CB: PFC [private first class]. At the time I was PFC, two days after I got in until I got out.

MH: Okay. So you decide you gotta go on a search for booze.

CB: Yup. It was on a back road; the guy told us to go on the back road. He says, "There's two farms on that road. Check them out."

MH: This is daylight?

CB: Broad daylight. And—

MH: You weren't needed by your unit? Were you told—

CB: Yeah, more or less, but we kinda sneaked around like that, you know. When you're stalemated, that's when you do all that. Yeah, we got—

MH: Were you stalemated at that point?

CB: Yes, because it took, you know, two regiments to take that Weimar. And well, we had three regiments that did leap-frogging, okay. And then we got there and we asked the people, you know, about the booze, where do you get it? And this one, she says, "Well, there is a—we call 'em state source here." This woman took us up the night before, about eleven o'clock at night. She says, "Now, if you go to the back door, there's a cellar door down there. You'll get the booze down that cellar." We was a little late; there was other guys down in there already.

Then the next day, we inquired again and they told us about the farms. "These farmers make schnapps. It's powerful schnapps." And so we was drivin' down the road to the second farmhouse and I'd say it was in about, let's see, from Weimar to the camp was about, what, ten kilometers, isn't it? About ten kilometers. We got just a little over half way and we saw—and I told the other guys. "Corporal Billman," I says, "Corporal, they got monkeys over here?" He says no. I said "Well, what's them up in the trees ahead of us?" because you know, their outfits were blacker than—and whatever they had on, it was dirty. He says, "Oh, they're civilians."

MH: What kind of trees were these?

CB: Like a scrub oak, little bigger than scrub oak trees. I don't know exactly what that—wasn't pine trees.

MH: So it's a tree that spreads—

CB: Yeah, yeah. And they was up there where you could grab a hold of the branch, because a pine tree you can't climb up; the branches will break on you. So they was up in there and there was about, oh, ten or fifteen of 'em.

MH: In different trees?

CB: Yup. And they're scared of us. They saw us first before we saw them, and so they jumped up in the trees to get away. We got under—

MH: How did you know who they were?

CB: We didn't.

MH: So, how come you're not takin' the guns out?

CB: Well, the guy came down. He come down out of the tree—we called 'em down, and of course with our broken German and their broken English, we got along pretty good. There's quite a few of them who talked English. And they explained what was on ahead of us.

MH: What'd they tell you?

CB: They told us about the camp that was up there about three kilometers away. So we got 'em in a truck—

MH: Wait. What did these guys look like?

CB: Oh, they didn't look like people. They was, you know, thin, emaciated and everything else. They had all kinds of disease—anything, they had it.

MH: How'd they find the strength to climb the tree?

CB: Don't ask me, 'cause how they find the strength to stay alive all this time? To answer that question is to know what man's like. But some of them were used in their factories. And they got one or two more spoonfuls more of the broth than the other guys, let's put it that way. But they got—they went there, we saw them. Now, the camp was already empty of German guards, three days before.

MH: What did they tell you? Did they tell you the guards had left?

CB: They told [us] the guards had left, there's no guards down there. Three days before that happened.

MH: How many—did they tell you how many prisoners there were?

CB: No, they did not say anything about that.

MH: Did they give you any idea of how big this camp was?

CB: No, not whatsoever. They just got down there and told us where the camp was. We took 'em down there to the gates, and they saw us, and they started rushing at us. I said, "Whoa."

MH: The gates were open?

CB: The gates were open.

MH: So there's four guys, four Americans in a three-quarter-ton stolen truck.

CB: I said, "We can't go in that camp whatsoever." So we beat it back to Weimar, got a hold of Captain Root, which is our CIC [Counterintelligence Corps] officer.

MH: CIC is—CIC stands for—? I used to know.

CB: I did, too.

MH: I'll find out.

CB: CIC officer. And he was, he was fairly old; he's about forty-five years old. He'd been around the world, and he knew Japanese. He could speak Japanese, 'cause he—when we got down to Füssen, he started teaching us. Well, then, that's the last we saw the camp because they got everybody come down. [George S.] Patton was there, [Dwight D.] Eisenhower was there.

MH: So, you never went back to the camp?

CB: Never went back to the camp. Never went back to the camp. And we run across several of them guys later—they come down into the town, the prisoners, you know—and they were kinda tearing it apart.

MH: They were tearing up Weimar?

CB: They were tearing up Weimar, yeah.

MH: They were looting it?

CB: We just let 'em go.

MH: Did you see them do this?

CB: Yes.

MH: Tell me what you saw.

CB: They would walk in the house, in the stores—mostly stores is what they hunt for, 'cause that's where the food was. And they'd just went in there and take what they wanted and walk back out. The German population wouldn't touch 'em. They didn't know—

MH: They were wearing the striped suits?

CB: Some had stripes; some had something like a black outfit. That's why we saw the ones in black on the trees; they didn't have the striped suits on. We run across them later on and I said, "I just can't believe it, you know, that man would treat man like that." It's hard to understand. But we were more or less, after all the fighting we'd done across France and that part and everything else, was used to blood. You know, your buddy and everything else, some of 'em were killed, like Corporal Danny Worth, one of the best guys there was in this world. He never swore; he'd blush when he'd go out with girls. He got it right here in the throat, shrapnel in his throat, down in France. It's hard to understand like that.

Well, then I got my Good Conduct medal; it was the day I was discharged. Because the guy says, "You don't have your Good Conduct medal." I says, "No, I wasn't too good."

MH: I never got one.

CB: And I says no. "Well, I'm gonna give you one anyway." So, I got that Good Conduct medal there at Indiantown Gap, and four weeks later I got another one in the mail. I've got 'em both at home now.

MH: So what—did you ever see the prisoners when they were in Weimar, catch any of the German guards? Catch any of the German people?

CB: The only thing I saw was when in the store they shoved the civilians out of the way. And the—like I say, the poor storekeeper, he couldn't do anything 'cause he knew that Americans there was there defending the prisoners at that time. So then—

MH: Were you told to defend them?

BC: Huh?

MH: Were you told to defend them, or let them do what they wanted to do?

CB: No, no. We're—after you see all that, what happens, you don't have to be told what to do. You do it, automatic. And then if you saw a German mistreating them whatsoever in the street or anywhere like that, anyplace, then you stepped in between.

MH: Did that happen to you?

CB: We were in apartment buildings down there in Weimar, fairly decent apartment buildings. They hadn't been touched by war. And they come down the street down there and they started shoving the people aside, making them—actually making them get off the walk and walk in the road, and they'd walk the walk. And some Germans resented that and they started fightin' them back, and then that's when we stepped in. Usually we'd fire a shot in the air and that'd settle it. Everybody'd be calm.

MH: It was clear what side you were on.

CB: It seems strange, though. The Germans would not run. They would get away from it. You fired that shot in the air. But those poor PWs, when they'd hear a shot, boy, they'd scam. I mean they'd beat it—they're gone. Because they didn't know if they was gonna get shot or not. And then it—from there on, there was several other camps, too, after Weimar. We hit one up there north of Gera, a camp up there. But it was more or less, it wasn't an extermination camp, it was more a labor camp.

MH: Was that Ebensee?

CB: No, no. Ebensee's down in Austria. And those people up there were fed a little better, because they had to work in factories. They had to keep them alive because they were specialists, more or less, in that camp.

MH: Did you go into that one?

CB: No, we didn't go in them, no. They told us, more or less after we hit Buchenwald, "Stay out of them, because they're full of disease. You never know what you're gonna get, what you're gonna pick up." Mostly lice, though. Oh, jeez.

MH: Typhus. Did you get to Ebensee?

CB: Ebensee? No, I never got into Ebensee. I think that it's either 318th or 319th went to Ebensee. Yeah, 318th, I'm pretty sure.

MH: And your unit was what?

CB: 317th, yeah.

MH: And you were carrying what, M1?

CB: M1.

MH: What'd you get the Silver Star for?

CB: The Bronze Star.

MH: Oh, Bronze Star. I thought—

CB: Yeah, that happened in France, just before we crossed the Moselle River at the town of Dieulouard. There's a road that goes up past the church, then it makes an S-turn like that, up at the top of the hill was the OPs [observation post] place. And they had the artillery OPs, operators up there. We had a guy by the name of Sergeant Kelly; he says "I'll go up there and see what's goin' on," because the German had thrown the 88s on that OP.

He went up, and he says [to] myself, these four guys with me, and about seven or eight other guys with us, he says, "Stay right here by this great big apple tree. Brock, you go out there by the S-turn here and dig it and be a spotter there, you know." Well, it's only about forty feet away from that tree, my position, so I started digging in a little bit because there's 88s right there in that turn. And I happened to look down the hill by the church, and here comes one of these here command cars, they were called at that time, going to come up there and it was full of officers.

MH: Germans?

CB: Nope.

MH: Americans?

CB: Americans. And I throw 'em a gun to cross the bush and I fired a shot over top of their heads and said, "You keep that damn, that goddamn gun—" Oh, sorry—

MH: That's okay, you can say that.

CB: I says, "You keep that thing right down there if you want to stay alive." Well, they were about fifty yards away. So they stopped, and I'm there, I think I was there about two hours in that position. I was still diggin'. I'm going down there, I'm gonna get out of there. I was back of a bush like, and they'd fire an 88—I don't know if they was aimin' at me or not, but hit that road, oh, about as far as the other side of that light down there. And it hit. And I says, "I wonder what's going on here." I couldn't hear the other guys.

So, I happened to look over across the field and here come a German patrol across there, and they weren't supposed to be on that side of the river. That's supposed to have been cleared. Here a German patrol come, about nine guys in it.

MH: And there's only one of you.

CB: One of me. I'm right there in that position. So I started firing. I hit the last guy first and then like that, the first three I knocked off. The last three, rather, I knocked off. I says, "Why aren't the other guys firing?" Here somebody come up and told them you gotta get out of here and those guys got out and they didn't tell me. Now we're only about thirty, forty yards apart, you know, and they didn't tell me. I'm there all by myself. So I got the Bronze Star for defensive position.

MH: Did you ever find the booze?

CB: Oh, the booze up there? No, we never did.

MH: You never got the booze.

CB: No, we went back down to town there and we got a hold of that girl again and told her where that state store was, like a state store, you know, I says, "They didn't have no booze." So she took us to another place there, and they had booze there. So, we liberated the booze.

MH: You weren't old enough to drink.

CB: Hey, I was twenty-four.

MH: Oh, never mind.

CB: I was the old man in that crowd. They called me the old man. (laughs) I was twenty-four at that time.

MH: So, this is now sixty-three years after you were at Buchenwald, and you saw what that does. Does that come back to you?

CB: I was a history buff at school. I loved history. I studied way back. And then I read and read, I was continually reading. Our study hall in high school was in the library, and I'd sit back there and I'd just read books. I did a book report on the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. I did a book report on it. Now that's somethin' to do. I read books. I'd read and read and read. And when I got over there, I'd get some books, too, that were wrote in English and German. I'd try translating as much as I could, you know. I read all the time there. I still do today. And crossword puzzles. Okay.

So, then I read this story about Buchenwald. I forget who it was that wrote that.

MH: Elie Weisel. The book was *Night*?

CB: And then—yeah. No, it wasn't that. You remember [Stephen] Ambrose, the guy down in New Orleans? He had a good bit on Buchenwald, too, and I watch him on TV and I'd watch stories on TV. And time he'd come up about Buchenwald and the

concentration camp, I was right there in front of it. Oh, the one camp, what was the name of it—it wasn't Buchenwald; it was before Buchenwald.

MH: Ohrdruf?

CB: I'm layin' on the couch watching this story. I kinda dozed a little bit. My daughter was watching it. She was about seventeen or eighteen years old at that time. She says, "Dad, there's you." I looked, and there I walked right across the screen at the concentration camp and there was a pile of bodies in there. Everybody's walkin' across, and I come right across there as plain as day.

MH: And that wasn't Buchenwald?

CB: No, before Buchenwald. Let me think.

MH: We only liberated one camp before Buchenwald—that was Ohrdruf.

CB: Who?

MH: Ohrdruf, O-h-r-d-r-u-f.

CB: Oh, okay.

MH: On April 3rd or 4th. And it was a Buchenwald sub-camp; it was near Buchenwald.

CB: Okay, maybe that was it.

MH: And they did shoot newsreel footage there.

CB: Yeah, got the footage on there of me. I wrote to the station about that to see if I could get a copy of it, never got no answer back. Just as plain as day.

MH: So, you were in a camp before Buchenwald?

CB: That's right. Ohrdruf.

MH: Ohrdruf.

CB: Ohrdruf.

MH: O-h-r-d-r-u-f. It was liberated by the 4th Armored.

CB: Well, that's who—we followed the 4th Armored.

MH: 4th Armored, and I forget what other unit was there.

CB: Yeah. Could have been. It don't ring a bell to me, but I know we had a camp. And I walked right across the screen like that. She says, "Dad, there you are." Just plain as day. Nice clear picture.

MH: They also—Eisenhower came there on the day that Buchenwald was liberated, April 12. Eisenhower, Patton, [Omar] Bradley were at Ohrdruf. And that's when they had—they'd set up a table that had all this bad stuff, shrunken heads—

CB: Ilse Koch was—

MH: She was at Buchenwald.

CB: She was at Buchenwald, yeah. Yeah.

MH: But they'd set up a table at Ohrdruf. So then your daughter saw you walk across the screen that day?

CB: Yeah, she saw—so it could have been Ohrdruf. There was a camp there—and then—Weimar, yeah. We stopped at Gera, as far east as we got. The next town was Chemnitz and we was getting ready to take that, and they said no, the Russians was gonna take it. So, then, oh, boy—I probably got it in my book. I got a book from day to day of the 317th at home with all the maps and everything else on there, all the stories we did.

MH: Does having seen that kind of thing come back to you?

CB: Well, it don't—that's a good question, because due to the fact—it don't come back to me, because I already know it and remember it. It don't have to come back. I'm there today. I can go right back today and remember from day to day from the first day I went into the service until I come out. And that's another story—[from] the first day I went in and when I come out in October forty-five [1945], I never had a day of sickness due to anything. I never missed a day of training. I never missed a day of combat due to sickness. Soon as I got home and got married, they started cuttin' me open all over the place.

MH: What'd they take out?

CB: Appendix, gall bladder, and hernia.

Unidentified Man: He's a little guy, he couldn't stand all those (inaudible).

CB: Aw, geez.

MH: You got hit one time?

CB: I got hit one time, right there. That's Krupp's steel right there; you can still feel it right there, still there today. The doctor says, "I'll take it out of there," and I said, "You touch that, you're going through the ceiling."

MH: You wanted the—

CB: Now, that's—this was different. Five years ago when I had my heart problem. That used to be white. And as soon as they put me on blood thinner, see, it turned dark on me. Yeah.

MH: That was the only wound you got over there?

CB: It was in the back. It was up in Heiderscheid [Luxembourg], Niederfeulen [Luxembourg]. I was on the road to Scheidel [Luxembourg] and they took three bursts on us. And that's when the captain says, "Brockman, you're a driver." I says yeah. He says, "Get that truck out of here and take her around and put it back over the hill. They're firin' at us." I had to go out, right out on a bend like this around there, and that's where the Germans were firing across from Scheidel into that bend with their 88s. I had that thing floored and it was just going putt-putt-putt-putt-putt. It was missing, and it started smoking.

I stopped in the field, threw the hood up, see what was burning under there. What happened was a piece of shrapnel went in and took out the drain plug on the carburetor there, and it was drippin' down on the manifold. That's what was steamin'. And, also, it took out a spark plug.

MH: So, how do you fix this?

{{{ 0:36:54.8}}}

CB: I didn't. I left the thing there and called the motor pool. They got a hold of it.

MH: That wasn't the stolen one?

CB: No, no, that wasn't the stolen one, no. And then, as that happened, here come two Germans across the road about seventy-five yards in front of me, going from woods to woods. And that's scrub oak over there. And they were goin' in there, and we had our second battalion over here to the right on that road, and they saw those two Germans going in there so they started firing into the scrub oak from the hip. I said, "Whoa, wait a minute. You got the 1st Battalion on the other side of these woods. Somebody's gonna get killed by your shot." I said, "Wait a minute, I'll go get 'em."

So, I charged into the woods and I flushed 'em out. The one German had a grey coat on and everything else, and he had a P38 strapped to his back, back here. When we saw that, we got kinda mad. This other guy with me, he says, "What're you gonna do with them, Brock?" I says, "I don't want 'em, you want 'em?" He says, "No, we'll shoot the bastards." Can't help it. We was getting ready to do that when here come a Jeep down

with four war correspondents on it, and they took the story down and they put it in the *Stars and Stripes* magazine. I got a copy of it at home. The *Stars and Stripes*.

MH: So you didn't shoot some guys?

CB: So, we went over to the dedication of Clairvaux monument, when they put that GI statue up. And after it was all over, we was going up to Kassel for the wine reception. Some guy taps me on the shoulder and I turned around. Boy, this guy was dressed fit to kill. He says, "You remember me?" I says no. He said, "You took me prisoner up in the woods up there." I says, "Oh, my God."

MH: He doesn't know how close he came.

CB: I says, "Where's the other guy?" He said, "I don't think he's alive." I says, "What happened?" Well, see, we had the PW camp down in Niederfeulen; it was in the barnyard where they have the stone walls around. Well, this guy from Michigan, he didn't like 'em and they put a line in front of his Jeep and he took 'em back to the PW camp. But instead of him going into the gate, he gunned it and went straight for the wall, hit the wall; those two Germans went over top of it all of a sudden. The big guy, he didn't go over, he hit the wall, and the little guy, he went over top right into the cow manure, you know.

So, he tapped me on the shoulder and he says, "You remember me? You took me prisoner." I says, "Whoa, how'd you remember?" He says, "You haven't changed a bit in all these years." I said, "You're a little fatter now." He says, "Well, the German army didn't feed me too good."

MH: Where was this?

CB: Up at Clairvaux.

MH: Clairvaux. And it was a reunion?

CB: It was a dedication of a monument to GIs they put up in that statue more or less; that's where the 28th Division was. And with Colonel Fuller, he was in charge of that regiment there. And so then we wrote back and forth together all these years, and at last trip over, I took a load of guys over in the bus, and I drove the bus over there. And we went to Munich and I said, "You guys can do what you want, you and your wives can do what you want, we're going to go up to this place here and see this guy."

Unidentified Man: Maybe he ought to chat with you even more. You can see—my wife said you wanted to find—I was a prisoner.

MH: I know. I'll talk to you tomorrow. Thank you.

Unidentified Man: Okay, tomorrow we can talk.

CB: And so we went there. His name was Werner Steinke. And I went up to his house; he has a beautiful apartment. He has two daughters, both registered nurses. And his wife had died, and he went to work—after he came out of the German army, PW, he went on to work with the U.S. government. And he worked with them all these years, and we wrote back and forth together, and he died three years ago in March. Three years ago, he died.

MH: What'd you do when you came back to the States?

CB: First day back, I went over to the library and got a job in the mine. Consolidated Coal.

MH: What'd you do the rest of your life?

CB: That's what I did for forty-two years.

MH: You were a miner?

CB: Yeah. My wife was treasurer-bookkeeper in Duquesne Light [Company].

MH: So you were—where was this, Pennsylvania?

CB: Pittsburgh, yeah, and I stayed there forty-three years; retired in eighty-four [1984] because they shut the place down, they closed down. And the wife, she stayed in there until she was seventy years old.

MH: Do you have kids?

CB: Yeah, two.

MH: Grandchildren?

CB: One. She's going to Williamsburg College, and this is her second year. She's gonna be a schoolteacher, I understand. I said, "Where you gonna get a job?" She said, "Not in Pennsylvania; either in North Carolina or out in Chicago because they pay the most."

Unidentified Man: Brock, how are you?

CB: How you doing man?

Unidentified Man: Barbara sent me the video on you getting your medal. Very nice.

CB: Thank you. I got them out there. There in the room.

Unidentified Man: Good.

MH: Anything else to tell me? Or are we covered?

CB: Last Friday they had the doin's for the Veterans of South Pennsylvania. Politician, he passed these medals out to us from the State of Pennsylvania. And also, they pulled a surprise on me. After fifty-three years, I finally got all my medals collected in one place. They put 'em in a showcase for me. Then I got the card from the Holocaust group from Massachusetts, I got that. They give me that. That was kind of a surprise. I was really shook up about that.

But the whole thing is, my daughter, she's a whiz on computer, okay? Well, she took—I'm walkin' across the stage carrying this plaque—well, it's a box. It's got a window on it and everything else with all my medals and everything else: Combat Infantry Badge, stars, what-cha-call-it. But sittin' on that box is my little dog.

MH: Oh, she did it with Photoshop?

CB: And he's down sitting at my feet, and he's presentin' it to me and it looks kinda strange, you know. He's a cross between a poodle and a Shih Tzu. He's only a year old. And he was scratchin' and hollerin' and everything and he wanted to come down here today.

But as far as combat concerned, our family goes way back to—I got a great, great ancestor, buried down in Chester, Pennsylvania, in a cemetery down there around Chester, he was buried in 1690. Had ancestors fought in the Revolutionary War, fought in the Civil War. In fact, I got my great-great-grandfather's—he was in the Civil War, and I got a whole list of his company men, names and everything, from Southwest Pennsylvania, where they were from. They fought mostly around West Virginia and down in Winchester. Down that way is where they fought, Shenandoah Valley. And then I got one from the Spanish-American War.

Our family tree goes back to the year 1205. I'm entitled to wear the shield with the deer and the dagger through his head, which means that your ancestors fought in the Crusades. My sister traced that back. Okay, the Brockman manor is still up—it was built back in the 1700s in England; it's still up today. And we got kicked out of Germany for 200 years because it was the wrong, I think, politics. We spent 200 years in Germany, that's where I get the German side. And then they went—there's a Brockman County, Brockmanville County in Germany, which we've located. And also the name "Brockman" means "man who lives by the water." That's what it means in German.

When we was up in Kassel, Ihringshausen is the main city that was—it's just north of the main city. That's where they threw the Tiger royal tanks at us. Just came out of the factory; the paint wasn't even dry. We knocked out the first five and the rest of 'em went back to the factory. All right. And one of the guys by the name of Igarfer of Staten Island, New York. He says "Brock, come on out here. Look at the name on this here house." It was Dr. Brockman.

So, the caretaker was still there in that house, and I said, “Where’s Dr. Brockman? I’d like to meet him.” “Oh, he’s on the Russian front.” That’s strange. Every time we get in a town, we’d ask the womenfolk of these towns, “Where is your husband?” “Oh, he’s on the Russian front.” If all these guys were on the Russian front, who were we fightin’?

MH: It’s like saying, “*Nicht Nazi.*” I wasn’t a Nazi, nobody was a Nazi.

CB: No, no. Did you vote for Hitler? No. I says, “How come he got 99 percent when they voted?” Yeah, how’d he get 99 percent? And then after the war was over, I come home and got married and everything else. I still grab a book, and she get mad because I got my nose in a book all the time. But it’s mostly about history, or about a war or something. Had to be action.

And then there was one—I forgot what the devil that movie was. I wrote ’em and I corrected ’em, you know. I said, “No way, this outfit was never there.” Well, a lot of outfits weren’t there. But did you see that plaque they got from Buchenwald in the room up here? Those outfits were in different camps all over. And then they got the—I just couldn’t believe it.

The one that hit me most was the camp that was down in Austria. Not Ebensee. This was a—this was a camp that I think it just was a labor camp. Before Obendorf—Obendorf was where the “Silent Night” song was written, that town. You know how they wrote that song—some mouse got in the organ and he chewed a reed out, one of the reeds out, so they didn’t know how to—so he adapted the music to a guitar, “Silent Night” was music from a guitar, that’s the way it come out. And I found that out.

MH: Tell me about the camp.

CB: This camp, we could see it, it was down in the valley. We went down into it, and I went in the office, and they had all kinds of records thrown all over the floor and everything else, and somebody says, “Hey, Brock, we’re moving.” I says, “Okay.” And I came out. But that camp there, it was full of women.

MH: Do you know what date it was?

CB: No. This had to be after we crossed the river at Brenna, whatever date that was.

MH: So, it’s in very late April?

CB: If I have a book here, I could tell you exactly what day it was, ’cause I got it from day to day in there, in the book.

MH: Do you know in the book what camp it was?

CB: Well, those camps like that, they didn't have no famous name to 'em like the other like Auschwitz, Buna, Buchenwald. But it was a—I know one thing: the fence around was nothing but barbed wire. That was all.

MH: And it was all women?

CB: It was all women. And they must have fed 'em pretty good; they weren't exactly skinny.

MH: They might have just gotten there, too.

CB: Well, I was downtown Pittsburgh one day, and I got into an old bookstore down there. And I saw three books, pictures of World War II. And I grabbed all three of 'em and brought 'em home. And after leafing through 'em, and there I saw myself, a picture with two DPs. I think it was taken after Weimar. Some camp, town—it had to be then because then we went south down into Austria.

MH: You could see it was you?

CB: Yes.

MH: For sure?

CB: The other guy in it was the name of Walden Garland; he was from Washington, and his face is in there. And that's why I found out it was me. And due to the fact, the little short guy, they were from Poland. And the tall guy was from Poland. But the short guy was tongue-tied. You try to understand Polish from a tongue-tied guy? No way. And that was, they had them in a building, right dead center of town, using them for labor, slave labor. And it was no concentration camp. They had camps like that all over Germany. They did slave labor. And this one girl in that camp, she came out, I mean her face was bloodied up, bruised, she had black eyes—everything. So we got a hold of [her] and asked her what happened. She says, "Well, that's that German over there, SS man."

MH: The SS were still there when you got there?

CB: Well, he was under—he was a prisoner. She says, "He tried to rape me and I fought back. I knew the Americans were coming, so I wasn't going to let him have me, and I fought back and he beat the heck out of me." And so one of the guys walked over and said, "Is this the guy?" She says "Yeah." He shot him. Just like that.

MH: See, I've heard stories like that from a lot of guys. That prisoners—

CB: When you go through combat, the first couple of days it bother you. To think to pull your trigger. But you gotta realize that, you can see him and he can see you—he's got a gun, too, pointing at you.

MH: But now you've got a prisoner, he's your prisoner.

CB: He's a prisoner.

MH: And you basically say—

CB: What make you more than anything else, these guys would fire their guns so they'd run out of ammunition and then smile, this way.

MH: What they smile and raise their hand?

CB: That's what makes you mad.

MH: Right, and so you shoot 'em. Did any officer ever come along and say, you know, you can't do this, it violates the Geneva Convention?

CB: Told time and time again about it. But we did it anyway. Nobody said anything to us. And then like, we took that—what German army was it we captured down there? Two hundred thousand men we captured. That was, we didn't even bother takin' 'em, we just tell 'em, "Start walking."

MH: Start walking. That I've heard, too. But I've heard a lot of guys tell me "We didn't take prisoners," especially if they were SS.

CB: Yes, especially in Luxembourg at the Battle of the Bulge. A lot of 'em were shot.

MH: Because of Malmédy or because it was just too much trouble?

CB: Just too much dang trouble, that's all. Like I say, when I took those two guys prisoner, I was supposed to walk 'em back and that was about three miles and then I had to come back. If you didn't have a ride or something like that, you know, and you don't feel like walking through that snow—

MH: But when the Germans did that to the Americans, the Americans get all pissed off.

CB: Yeah. And then they started doin' it, the word come down, "Shoot all prisoners." It actually come back, "Shoot all prisoners. If you don't want 'em, shoot 'em."

MH: Okay.

CB: And then about four days later, you gotta take prisoners. So, there you are. And you see all this blood spilt and your own guys bein' killed and everything else, one way or the other, due to the fact they been shot and blowed up or something with artillery or in a tank or something, and from Utah Beach all the way across France, into these countries, you get—you get used to it. Now, my first prisoner was Polish.

MH: How'd that happen?

CB: Up in France. I was a point man, walking down the road, I was at a woods where they had a gas attack in World War I, and all the trees were bleached, chlorine, bleached white, and he come out with his hands up, but he had a different kind of uniform on. It was wine color. And I asked him what he's doing—and he didn't have a helmet on, he had one of these caps on; we call 'em "go-to-hell hats." He told me he'd been here all day in these woods waiting for us. He says, "I haven't had a drink of water all day, you got some water?" I said, "I dunno." Water in my canteen was empty.

I called Sergeant Sawyer, who lives in Sewickley [Pennsylvania]; I don't know if he's alive or not today. And he speaks Polish. I says, "This guy's your *compadre*. See what he wants." And he says, "Well, he's thirsty." I says, "Give him a drink, you've got water." He says, "No, don't give 'em nothing." That's what he said. And that was my first prisoner. He was a Polish man. What he was a loader on a machine gun, and the lieutenant in charge of the machine gun was about fifty yards in back of him with a string, and he'd pull that string to fire that machine gun. All they had to do was load it. Wasn't being aimed; he'd just pull that, fire; 'course you know we're gonna duck when you hear that machine gun take off. And so, that was the first prisoner.

And then, everybody—sometimes we have to go to a school to give a speech about veterans and that. You know what the first question the kids ask you? "How many men'd you kill?" I tell 'em, "None."

MH: And you say that because—?

CB: They don't need to know. It's better for 'em if they don't.

MH: Because?

CB: I don't know why, but that's—that's what we tell 'em now when they ask how many did you kill; we say, "None."

MH: But that's not really giving them an idea of what war is like.

CB: No, it's not. But we do tell 'em the dirty facts about artillery and that, killing and everything else that way. So then, I says, "No, I will not tell you how many I killed. I spilt blood, let's put it that way." When they interviewed me at St. Vincent College, I says, "I will not tell you dirty stories about shooting, killing and everything, the blood—I'm gonna tell you about actually what happened on a patrol." You had certain guys do certain things, you know, when you move into town.

Guy by the name of McDermott from up in Boston, Massachusetts—he could get a chicken and have that thing skinned and ready to cook in nothin' flat. We had another guy, he'd go around cellars looking for potatoes; and then another guy, he was looking for meat. You know, in those cellars over there, they make a trough out of wood, like this.

And there'd be about oh, ten, fifteen feet long. That's where they'd throw that meat in there, that trough. That's where it'd stay all winter. And then my job was to get the booze.

MH: Were you good at your job?

CB: Ah, I was an expert. (both laugh) We got 'em, we crossed over into German there, (inaudible) and from there on we kept on goin'. We got into this little town, they had a store, and we got there at night. And they was throwing mortar shells on us, oh left and right. So, we got down in the cellar of this store, and I got to rootin' around and I said, "Oh, looky here. I got me a bottle of white brandy." Not brandy but wine, white wine, and a bottle of schnapps. I was drinkin' schnapps and chasing it down with white wine.

MH: That could cause a real bad headache.

CB: That caused a real bad headache and everything else, too. And I tell you, four of us got it and next morning, we got so sick. But I didn't stay in the cellar all night, because I got sick during the night, and we had about twenty guys sleeping there in bedrolls there, and mine was next to the wall out of the way, and I got sick, and I sprayed everybody across there. I went out the cellar door and they locked the door on me, wouldn't let me back in. I had to sit on the steps all night long with mortar shells coming into that town. But it was the worst damn long road for us, leaning against the wall there.

And here come the colonel, stopped right there and says, "What's wrong with these guys?" to the sergeant, you know. Sergeant Kelly. He says, "What's wrong with them guys?" and he says, "Oh they got some bad C rations." (MH laughs) That's enough to make anybody sick, that stuff would. But from then on, why we moved to—that's when the guy, not far from that is when I got the Congressional Medal of Honor, [Day G.] Turner.

MH: When did you start talking to school kids about the war?

CB: Oh, why, I never talked in front of my family.

MH: You never talked in front of your family, to say what you saw?

CB: No.

MH: Why?

CB: I dunno, it just never come out like that. They knew I was studying about the history of all that, and they never asked me, that's the main thing. Then the boy, when he come home, an Eagle Scout, he was an Eagle Scout. And he said, "Dad, they want you to talk about the war." And I started talking—I'd tell them about when I first started in and everything else, training down in Camp Forrest and then up in Salinas, Kansas, up there to Camp Phillips, and out to desert training out there in Yuma, Arizona, and then come

back from there. And then I says, “I walked all over Tennessee, I walked all over Kansas, desert training. I walked all over that desert out there.”

MH: Sounds like you’re avoiding telling them about what happened in Germany.

CB: Yeah. So, then I got across—I says, “I walked all over England, because we had training over there. See, they had double daylight savings time over there. Twelve o’clock, it’s still light out, so we’d do our night problems then. And when I got over to France,” I says, “I went over Utah Beachhead. I didn’t go to Omaha; I didn’t get famous for that. We went Utah. We went across France. I went through the town where Joan of Arc was born and raised. Orleans, France, is where she’s from.” And I told ’em about that, and mostly I tell ’em about the towns and about history.

MH: Did you tell them about the concentration camps?

CB: I told ’em about the camps, I says, “It’s an ugly sight,” period. I said, “You have to get used to it” and I told ’em all about that.

MH: You’re the only guy who’s not mentioned the smell.

CB: (laughs) Oh, it was there, let’s put it that way. Another thing, you talk about the smell. When that sun comes out, you got those animals out there dead, you got GIs and Germans dead laying around, and they get to swelling up, that stinks. And you get used to that smell.

MH: You get used to it?

CB: You will get used to it. You get used to it, it don’t bother you anymore.

MH: But the concentration camp smell was different?

CB: It was more of a dirty smell, let’s put it that way. That’s hard—it just felt like, well, you know, like you had a bad case of the diarrhea all the time. It got all over you. That’s what they smelled like. And then, as you mentioned, it never dawned on me about it. I’ll tell you another thing about it. Not bragging or anything, but when I come home I got the job in the mine. In the spare time, I helped an undertaker for fifteen years. So, then I had a dark room and I did wedding pictures in black and white when they color then I said forget it. I was a photographer, I know a little bit about this. And then three of us out there, we only work seven hours a day at the mine, so we got a lot of daylight to do. After 2:15—

MH: Seven hours underground?

CB: No, no, in the clean plant, where the dust is, rocks and dirt and coal is crushed. So then the three of us, we got jobs in the summertime long as it’s daylight, we’d paint houses, too, in our spare time. Now I’ll tell you another thing; we’s only working three

days a week back here in the fifties [1950s]—three days a week. You know we had money left over on payday after just three days a week. You try that today.

MH: When you worked in the mines, did you go in the mines?

CB: Yes. I went in the mines up there in Number Four mine and we went over to the library, Number Ten mine, that's where the good coal come from, the low sulfur and that. Those mines are done now. And the place that I worked, clean place where I was, Mine 160, is—now it's an interchange.

End of interview