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John P. Brooks oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, September 5, 2008

John P. Brooks (Interviewee)

Michael Hirsh (Interviewer)

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Concentration Camp Liberators Oral History Project
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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: Your name is John P. Brooks, B-r-o-o-k-s?

John Brooks: Correct.

MH: And what's your date of birth?

JB: 7-4-24 [July 4, 1924].

MH: And you were with the—what unit in the 65th Infantry Division were you in?

JB: I was with Recon [Reconnaissance].

MH: With Recon? Where were you before you went in the service?

JB: Where was I? What do you mean by that?

MH: Where were you living, what were you doing?

JB: I was a student in high school in Saltville.

MH: In where?

MH: In Saltville, Virginia.

MH: Okay. So, when did you finally go in the Army?

JB: I didn't plan. I was drafted.

MH: Okay, when were you drafted?

JB: You ask me questions (inaudible). (laughs)

MH: That's okay.

JB: Oh, let's see. I guess I went in in forty-three [1943].

MH: In forty-three [1943]. You took basic training where?

JB: I took basic training with the 99th [Infantry] Division.

MH: Okay. How'd you end up in the 65th?

JB: Well, when I finished my basic in Mississippi, I got transferred to the 65th.

MH: And did you go overseas with them?

JB: Yes, I did.

MH: Do you remember where you left from and where you went to?

JB: Left from New York City and landed in Le Havre, France.

MH: And when was that?

JB: That was in, uh—

MH: It was in late forty-four [1944]?

JB: Late forty-four [1944], yeah.

MH: What was the first battle you were in?

JB: Well, I think Strüth was the first battle with the 65th—I mean that the whole Division was in. As far as Recon, I can't truthfully say we were in any battles. I mean, after the Battle of the Bulge, everything was—you know, more or less the war was almost over. And it was just clean up, occupancy.

MH: What was—the document I have says that you got to two different concentration camps, Ohrdruf and Flossenbürg. Is that right?

JB: Ohrdruf, I remember that one. But Flossenbürg, I don't recall that.

MH: Can you tell me about Ohrdruf and what you remember about it?

JB: All I can tell you about it is, actually, we didn't know what it was. When we—what I'm doin' now is speaking for my platoon, not talking for the whole division or the whole Recon.

MH: I understand.

JB: We rolled by it, and actually, we didn't know what we were lookin' at, 'cause we'd never heard about it. We got credit for the liberation, but I don't recall, you know, that we opened the gates or anything. We were on a mission, so we had to keep going.

MH: That's the story I hear from lots of guys, is that they'd see camps and it was like, "There it is," and they had to keep going. So, you never went inside?

JB: No, I never went into that camp, inside. I mean, a lot of the guys from our division were ordered by [Dwight D.] Eisenhower to go take a look. But, like I said, we were on a mission, so we just didn't get back to that part.

MH: Did you get to another camp, then, eventually?

JB: I went to Mauthausen after the war, and looked around that camp.

MH: But during the war, before—

JB: No, no, no. What I'm telling you is that Ohrdruf, I remember that one distinctly.

MH: But you weren't with the 65th when they got to Flossenbürg.

JB: Yeah, I was with the 65th, but—I don't think you quite understand what I'm saying here. Recon—do you know what Recon does in battle, I reckon?

MH: You're usually out in front of the main unit looking around.

JB: There you go. So, no, to answer your question.

MH: Just one other question: you didn't see any of the marches of any of the prisoners from those camps on the roads as you were out with Recon, did you?

JB: There were so many displaced people out there; you didn't know one from the other.

MH: Really? And this is before the end of the war or after?

JB: No, this was during the war.

MH: During the war?

JB: Yeah.

MH: When you say there were so many of them, what do you see? You're riding around in what, half-tracks or jeeps?

JB: I'm in an armored car.

MH: Armored car, okay. And when you see these people on the roads, what do you see? What do they look like?

JB: Well, they look like they're ready for the concentration camps. After the war—let me run this by you.

MH: Sure.

JB: I guess it was a week. When the war ended, we were sent back to a place called Hörsching, Austria.

MH: Okay. What was the name of the place?

JB: Hörsching. H-o-r-s-c-h-i-n-g.

MH: Okay.

JB: That's what they call the Linz Airport today. And there was a camp there. It was not a concentration camp, but it was just people that were getting prepared to go to a

concentration camp. You could—they looked like they'd already been, you know, underfed, no hygiene, any of that stuff. That's about all I can remember about it.

MH: When did you see that?

JB: This was in forty-five [1945].

MH: But just before or after the war ended?

JB: This was about two weeks after.

MH: Two weeks after. All right. You don't happen to know any other people who were in the division who might have been in units that spent any time in some of the camps, do you?

JB: I know one fella that's—he's had several pieces—excuse me just a minute.

MH: Sure.

JB: In our organization that has written quite a few papers on it. I can give you his name, if you like.

MH: That'd be very helpful. I'd appreciate that.

JB: Well, give me time to get my—

MH: Okay.

JB: Where are you located?

MH: I'm in Punta Gorda, Florida.

JB: Oh, yeah?

MH: I'm where Hurricane Charley hit four years ago, and where we just got messed with by a tropical storm last week.

JB: I worked in Florida back in the fifties [1950s].

MH: Yeah?

JB: All right, let me get back out here where I can see this thing.

MH: Okay.

JB: Just a sec.

MH: Sure.

JB: There's a fella down in Florida that has written a lot about this stuff. Okay, this guy's name is Leo Serian.¹ L-e-o, Leo, S-e-r-i-a-n. ... is his address, his telephone number is....

MH: And he was in the 65th, or you just know him from something?

JB: He was in the 65th.

MH: 65th, okay.

JB: We both—both of us were responsible for getting that flag in the Holocaust Museum.

MH: Okay. All right. Well, I will track him down, then. Thank you very much for your time. I sure appreciate it.

¹ Leo Serian was also interviewed for the Concentration Camp Liberators Oral History Project. The DOI for his interview is C65-00125.

JB: You're welcome.

MH: Okay. Bye, sir.

JB: Bye.

End of interview