

September 2008

John E. Critzas oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, September 5, 2008

John E. Critzas (Interviewee)

Michael Hirsh (Interviewer)

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/hgstud_oh

 Part of the [African Languages and Societies Commons](#), [History Commons](#), [Other Languages, Societies, and Cultures Commons](#), [Race, Ethnicity and post-Colonial Studies Commons](#), and the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

Scholar Commons Citation

Critzas, John E. (Interviewee) and Hirsh, Michael (Interviewer), "John E. Critzas oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, September 5, 2008" (2008). *Digital Collection - Holocaust & Genocide Studies Center Oral Histories*. Paper 41.
http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/hgstud_oh/41

This Oral History is brought to you for free and open access by the Digital Collection - Holocaust & Genocide Studies Center at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Digital Collection - Holocaust & Genocide Studies Center Oral Histories by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact scholarcommons@usf.edu.

COPYRIGHT NOTICE

This Oral History is copyrighted by the University of South Florida Libraries Oral History Program on behalf of the Board of Trustees of the University of South Florida.

**Copyright, 2011, University of South Florida.
All rights, reserved.**

This oral history may be used for research, instruction, and private study under the provisions of the Fair Use. Fair Use is a provision of the United States Copyright Law (United States Code, Title 17, section 107), which allows limited use of copyrighted materials under certain conditions. Fair Use limits the amount of material that may be used.

For all other permissions and requests, contact the UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH FLORIDA LIBRARIES ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM at the University of South Florida, 4202 E. Fowler Avenue, LIB 122, Tampa, FL 33620.

Concentration Camp Liberators Oral History Project
Oral History Program
Florida Studies Center
University of South Florida, Tampa Library

Digital Object Identifier: C65-00024
Interviewee: John E. Critzas (JC)
Interviewer: Michael Hirsh (MH)
Interview date: September 5, 2008
Interview location: Conducted by telephone
Transcribed by: Kathy Kirkland
Transcription date: November 22, 2008
Audit Edit by: Mary Beth Isaacson, MLS
Audit Edit date: January 26, 2010
Final Edit by: Kimberly Nordon
Final Edit date: January 26, 2010

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

John Critzas: And your name again?

Michael Hirsh: Michael Hirsh. H-i-r-s-h.

JC: Okay, Mike.

MH: First of all, I've got a recorder that I just turned on. Could you give me your full name and spell it for me, please?

JC: Sure. My name is John E., initial E., last name Critzas. That's spelled spelled C-r-i-t-z-a-s.

MH: ...Okay, and what's your date of birth, sir?

JC: April 26, 1925.

MH: And you were with the—you said A Company, 714th Tank Battalion, 12th Armored Division.

JC: That's correct. I served with them from the very beginning. Well, they began, I 'm sorry, in Camp Campbell. I was an ASTP [Army Specialized Training Program] student at the time, and they shut down the program, so I was transferred to the 12th along with about a thousand others to bring them up to strength so we could go into combat.

MH: What were you doing before you went in the Army?

JC: I was studying chemical engineering at Washington University when I turned eighteen, and I was drafted two days after I turned eighteen.

MH: They didn't waste any time.

JC: Not at all.

MH: What year and month was that?

JC: That was April 26th in 1943.

MH: Forty-three [1943].

JC: And I was gone May 2.

MH: Huh. Okay, so they sent you where?

JC: They sent me to Fort Bliss, Texas, for my basic training.

MH: And then what happens?

JC: Well, after basic training, the outfit I was in, which was an antiaircraft outfit in an M-16 half-track, was slated to go to the Pacific. I didn't wish to go there, so I applied for Army Specialized Training, which was a program that was active at the time. And since I

had been in college in the engineering school, I was selected out of a battalion of about 500 men, and told to pack my bags and head for Texas A&M in College Station.

MH: And how long did that last?

JC: About four months. Lasted from about August of forty-three [1943] to January of forty-four [1944].

MH: And then they—they shut—

JC: And then the program closed down and we were all shipped to 12th Armored Division.

MH: And the 12th Armored was forming up as a full division?

JC: Well, yes. It had been in Camp Campbell, Kentucky, and it was transferred to Camp Barkley in Abilene, right outside Abilene, Texas. The strength of an armored division is about 12,000 men and they had about 10,000, so they imported about 2,000 ASTP guys, which were schoolboys. We were usually anywhere from three to five years, sometimes ten years, younger than the regular men in the division.

MH: What did you know about tanks at that point?

JC: Zero.

MH: (laughs)

JC: I hadn't even seen one. I was in anti-aircraft at Fort Bliss, which was not a tank outfit, shooting at airplanes.

MH: How'd you feel about getting put in an armored unit?

JC: Well, you don't have any feelings at age eighteen. Not even nineteen, just eighteen. You just do what you're told.

MH: Right. So, when did they ship the division over?

JC: In August of forty-four [1944].

MH: And you went where?

JC: I went to England; can't remember the names of the places offhand.

MH: That's okay.

JC: I went to England. We received our equipment in England and we got on an LST [Landing Ship, Tank]—a number of LSTs—and went across the Channel, the English Channel, in August or September of forty-four [1944].

MH: Forty-four [1944]. So, this is a couple of months after D-Day.

JC: Shortly after D-Day, that's correct. And we went up the Seine River to a little city called Rouen, R-o-u-a-n [sic.]. And we disembarked there out of the front of the LST, and we could see the front at that time. So, we slept that night as soon as we pulled into an open field, and slept outside. And it was a little bit of an experience, because it was the beginning of combat experience.

MH: Were you shelled there?

JC: No, we weren't shelled that far back. We were probably about three or four miles back. And the artillery at the time—the German artillery was on the move too much to be able to locate us and shell us.

MH: What kind of tank were you on?

JC: The M-4; it was a Sherman.

MH: A Sherman, okay.

JC: M-4 A-3, I think they called it; it was 76mm guns.

MH: And your job was?

JC: Gunner.

MH: Tell me what that means and what you do.

JC: Well, there were five men in a tank. In World War II, in the Sherman tank, one was a driver, one was assistant driver; those were in the front. And in the turret was the gunner, the loader of the cannon, and the tank commander. Those were the three men in the turret. We all knew each other's job. We were all trained in each other's job. We all had to drive the vehicle, we had to know how to load it, we had to know how to fire the—

(to someone else) Yeah, I'll be right there.

We had to fire .30 caliber machine guns; we had to fire the .50 caliber machine guns.

MH: So, you slept that first night, and then you do what?

JC: Well, then we rolled into action and started chasing the enemy.

MH: How'd you deal with that?

JC: (laughs) As a gunner, I didn't know where we were, which direction we were goin'. I just got a slap on the head from the tank commander, if we had a target. He said, "Target, two o'clock," and I traversed that area and tried to find out what he was talkin' about by looking through the telescope. If we were rolling, it was very difficult to shoot because the tank was not capable of firing accurately when it was moving. Today's Abrams tank is right on; it's all laser and radar and automatic firing and everything.

MH: What was the first major battle you were in?

JC: You know, I can't remember the name of it. But we had encounters, as we were going down the road, chasing the enemy at a pretty good rate of speed. What they did was performing a rear-guard action: they would leave anti-tank guns behind, sometimes 88s, which would knock our tanks out but we couldn't knock them out. I lost three tanks as we went along through the war.

MH: Three tanks that were shot out from under you, you mean?

JC: Basically, yes.

MH: How do you get through that experience, and then climb back on the horse?

JC: (laughs) Well, you do, that's all. You do what you're told, and if you're not injured severely and you're physically okay, you're in combat. And we lost three men [that] were killed in one tank incident. I was one of the fortunate ones that got out, and my tank commander. The two of us pretty much went through the war together, but we had two other crews besides the one that we lost.

MH: What was your rank at the time?

JC: Corporal. It was called T5, T like Tom. I was a Technician Fifth Grade.

MH: Were you hit at all?

JC: I got a little shrapnel in the back of my neck. They dug it out, put a Band-Aid on it, and sent me back to the tank.

MH: Right. What did you know at that point about concentration camps or the Holocaust?

JC: Zero. Zero. Zero. Absolute zero. We didn't know about that until April of 1944.

MH: Forty-five [1945].

JC: Yeah, yeah. The war ended in May, I'm sorry. April of forty-five [1945], we crossed the Danube [River]. Well, first we crossed the Rhine [River], of course, and then we crossed the Danube. And it was after we crossed the Danube that we encountered the Landsberg concentration camp.

MH: Tell me about that experience.

JC: Well, we smelled it from ten miles away, and we didn't know what the odor was. We knew the odor of combat and we knew the odor of dead soldiers, but we didn't know the horrendous odor of a concentration camp. We drove through the wall of one, and we saw all these emaciated prisoners with striped suits on that looked like 200 pound men starved down to about 80 pounds, the vast majority of them being Jewish. We found out pretty quick what it was, and it was just a day or two before [Dwight D.] Eisenhower and [George S.] Patton and [Omar] Bradley and [Bernard] Montgomery and everybody—all of the big brass of the European theatre—descended on the concentration camps.

MH: When you—you said literally you smelled the concentration camp and you're going down the road, and what do you see at first?

JC: You don't see anything. You don't know where it's coming from. We saw these things that looked like prisons, but we didn't know what they were. And, of course, we're looking for the enemy, and there wasn't any enemy to be found. As we approached it, the odor got even worse and there were no people around to talk to and ask or anything. I was semi-conversational in German, so I could interview and talk to people in their language. But nobody was there—visible—so we just drove through the wall of the concentration camp, and here were all of the emaciated prisoners, and the rest of them stacked up like cordwood waiting to be burned.

MH: This was a stonewall, or a brick wall?

JC: Stone, a big stone wall about ten foot high.

MH: And you could just drive a tank right through that?

JC: Oh, yeah, it doesn't even slow you down.

MH: And, so, you don't know what's on the other side of that wall?

JC: No.

MH: And your driver drives straight through the wall.

JC: That's correct. I turned the gun around, that's all. I was instructed to turn the gun around, because the 76 protrudes beyond the front of the tank. So I was told, "Traverse 180 degrees," and I did that, and there wasn't any impact when we hit the wall. We just went through it. And we stopped on the other side, and we looked at all of these people and of course they—when we stopped they all came up to the tank. Several of them knew English and welcomed us, and they were asking for food.

MH: Are you outside of the turret, or are you inside the tank?

JC: I'm a gunner, but at that point we all stuck our heads out when we realized there wasn't incoming fire. There wasn't any incoming shells or incoming rounds, so we weren't under attack and we stick our heads out.

MH: And you see this sight.

JC: And we see this sight. We see these emaciated people, and we say, "What's going on?" and they say they were prisoners and the Germans are gone. There were some still locked in their cells with 500 pound bombs ready to explode. We got the bomb disposal squad in there to deactivate the things, and we released the prisoners from their cells.

MH: I don't know—I'd never heard that story about the bombs. These were 500 pound aerial bombs?

JC: Well, I don't know whether they were aerial or what, but they had bombs set on a timer to go off within a couple or three hours and they had prisoners locked in their cells. They were going to blow up the prisoners so that they could do away with the evidence.

MH: So, you got off the tank and you saw those?

JC: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. At that point we got off, yeah.

(to someone else) I'm coming right in.

MH: So tell me—do you need to go?

JC: My daughter has dinner for us and all. They're asking for me.

MH: Could I call you back in a little while, or could you call me after dinner?

JC: Yeah, why don't you give me a ring in about an hour or so?

MH: Okay. I'll be happy to do that.

JC: An hour, hour and a half. You can use the cell if you want. I don't have their phone number off the top of my head, or I'd give you the land line.

MH: Okay.

Part 1 ends; part 2 begins

MH: This is part two of the interview with John Critzas, C-r-i-t-z-a-s. When we were talking before, you talked about the tank busting in, and you had mentioned that they had discovered there were some bombs wired to go off. How did you find out about those?

JC: The people told us.

MH: The people who were not locked up, you mean?

JC: Yeah, the ones that were wandering around in the courtyard told us that—oh, there were a thousand, a couple thousand people there in that place, and there were some of them that were still interred and locked in their cells. And they told us that the Germans had put bombs in there and had scheduled them to go off, and we got our bomb squad in there.

But you know what happened to us right away, like within an hour or so, after Eisenhower was there and the big—the generals and everything came in—Patton said, “You guys get out of here,” the tankers, ’cause we were pretty much the lead of the armored division. And the tanks led the attack into Germany. And he said, “You guys get out of here and keep chasin’ Germans. Don’t stop. We’ve got ’em on the run; we don’t want them to stop and regroup and set up their defenses.”

MH: You’re breaking up again.

JC: Well, I’m getting too far away from the base in there. How’s this?

MH: That’s good.

JC: All right, well, let me go here in the other room.

MH: Okay, ’cause it begins to sound like you’re underwater.

JC: (laughs) Okay. Well, the cell phone was—I’m sorry.

MH: This is fine now.

JC: All right. I’ve walked back into the other part of the house, so probably no problems.

MH: Okay. But, I mean, from the point at which you break in the wall and you get in there and you find out about the bombs—is that like minutes, hours?

JC: Oh, no, it’s like in the first few minutes. They told us right away.

MH: Okay, so how long does it take to get EOD [Explosive Ordinance Disposal] guys up there to defuse that stuff?

JC: You know, I don't really know what the time frame was; it wasn't that long. And they weren't right with us at our elbow, because they weren't tankers; they were in headquarters, division headquarters, and they had to be contacted. But the communication was pretty fast. When you tell 'em there—you know, like the demolition crews that deactivated the bombs on the bridges that they were going to blow across the Rhine, and across the Danube. These guys got there pretty quick and did their work.

MH: So, what's your personal reaction when you find out there's bombs set to blow up and you don't know when they're going to go off?

JC: Well, you know, we had stuff exploding all around us all the time, and one bomb was like another. But we weren't sitting in a room, locked in a room, with a bomb in the floor not knowing whether it was going to blow or not.

MH: But it does increase the pucker factor.

JC: Eh, you know, under that kind of pressure and at that age, you don't feel anything. You don't know if you're going to live another day or not. And you just don't think about that stuff, that's all. You find out what's going on and you take whatever action's necessary to try and eliminate it. And in our case with those particular bombs, we had to contact somebody to get 'em defused. We couldn't do it. We had an engineer battalion with us, and an ordinance battalion, and they had the experts in there to deactivate those things.

MH: So, are you still there when they show up to do it?

JC: No. No, we were hustled out of there by Patton.

MH: When you say Patton, was Patton literally there?

JC: Oh, sure.

MH: When you were there?

JC: Sure.

MH: Really!

JC: I saw him personally a couple of times. But, you know, the corporal in the tank doesn't talk to a general.

MH: Not unless he's in big trouble.

JC: Yeah, right. But he was there personally with Eisenhower. And we were told immediately when Patton got there, we were told to keep going. "Don't stop, and keep chasing the Germans." And he mobilized the tanks and said, "You guys get the hell out of here and go down the road; we'll catch up to you. We'll post a rear guard here and take care of everything, and you guys keep on going." We were ordered out of there. We didn't even get to do the burial.

By the way, have you had any copies of our newspaper?

MH: No.

JC: We have a newspaper for the 12th Armored Division called the *Hellcat News*. I happen to be the editor of it. I inherited that. I put an issue out in April which featured the Holocaust. And it has a lot of scenes in there of exactly what we saw, and pictures taken from exactly what we saw. So, if you e-mail me your address—I don't have a pencil and paper right here in front of me, but my e-mail is...If you email me your physical address, I'll send you one of those papers.

MH: Did you take any pictures when you were in there?

JC: Well, I had a camera and I took pictures, and I lost them. I didn't have any personally that I got back with. We lost three tanks, and they happened to be on one of the tanks that I lost. And you don't hang onto a camera; you're lucky if you get out with your skin.

MH: Do you have any pictures of yourself over there?

JC: Oh, I think so. Yeah, I believe so.

MH: When you send me the newspaper, if you could send me—what I'd like is a picture of yourself from World War II and one from today, you know, from this year.

JC: (laughs) Okay.

MH: And I'll scan the photos and send them right back to you.

JC: Well, I can do the same. I can scan them and send them to you.

MH: Okay.

JC: I'll dig them up.

MH: All right. I'll send you—the publisher wants them at 300 DPI [dots per image], 200 percent grayscale. I'll put that in the email.

JC: They're black and white, of course.

MH: Yeah, of course. Did you see any other camps besides Landsberg?

JC: Well, Landsberg had about ten camps in our area. We just saw that one, but we knew there were others.

MH: Do you know which one of the camps that was?

JC: Yeah, I can't remember those names.

MH: I know Landsberg was a sub-camp of Dachau, but there were the Kaufering camps —

JC: Which ones?

MH: Kaufering. K-a-u-f-e-r-i-n-g.

JC: Yeah, they were there, too. But we were run out of it very quickly, because they wanted us to keep the line moving, going east, so that we could end the war. That was the principal objective.

MH: Right. The experience you had as an eighteen-year-old kid seeing that stuff—does that come up later in life?

JC: In what way?

MH: In a negative way. Does it affect you?

JC: Eh, I wouldn't say that. I mean this is sixty-two years later. I'm eighty-four years old. I still remember it like it was yesterday. But negatively—the only negative aspect is you wonder how any race of people, or body of people, could have conceded to go along and do that kind of stuff, to be that nasty to whether it was the Jews, or whether it was the Poles or Russians or whoever. You know, how could people be convinced that they could extinguish “undesirables,” if you will, and be convinced that it was the right thing to do. That's just unintelligible. And we don't want that happening again ever, under any administration. So we remember that, those of us, and there are 1,200 of us in the 12th Armored Division that are still living. We all feel—none of us want any war, least of all what's going on now.

MH: Right.

JC: But we're not gonna pull troops out, because this started to be a similar type of experience, when Saddam Hussein was in there. You know, he was pullin' off stuff similar to what Hitler was doing. He was killing his own people. Any dictator that moves off in that direction needs to be squelched, and done quickly. And so, I was all in favor of what [George W.] Bush did regarding the current war, and I'm still in favor of maintaining vigilance over there, that this group doesn't happen again.

MH: I mean, we got somebody [Mahmoud Ahmedinejad] over in the country next to where we are that's saying the Holocaust didn't happen.

JC: Where's this?

MH: Iran.

JC: Oh, yeah, absolutely. Absolutely, they're saying it didn't happen. And Eisenhower made that statement; I don't know if you are aware of that.

MH: Yes.

JC: He addressed the troops—we weren't there when he came, but he addressed the troops at the time. He said, "You guys take as many pictures as you can, because someday, some son-of-a-bitch is gonna say it did not happen."

MH: "It didn't happen." Yeah.

JC: And he's right.

MH: I understand the Army had signal corps photographers and they printed this stuff up like postcards to be mailed home.

JC: Absolutely. Absolutely.

MH: Have you had occasion to speak about what you saw there, like to school kids or that sort of thing?

JC: Oh, yeah. Yeah, I've been to our museum in Abilene when I'm there. I spend a few days; I'll usually conduct a group. We have a Holocaust room in our museum in Abilene. And I take the kids, and these are ten-year-olds and twelve-year-olds. I take 'em up there and show it to 'em and say, "Now, you guys don't know what it's like to look at dead people, but this is what we saw. And I was not much older than you are"—we had high school kids there, too—"not much older than you guys are. I was nineteen years old at the time, and I had my nineteenth and twentieth birthdays overseas, and this is the kind of thing that I saw."

MH: How did the kids react to it?

JC: Oh, well, you know. Almost in disbelief.

MH: Yeah. But by the end of the day, they're convinced.

JC: Well, they don't really spend a day; they'll spend an hour, or two hours. And you don't know whether they're convinced or not. All you know is that you've explained it to 'em, you told them, "This is history. We lived it. We did it. This is what we saw, and this is what we did." And I think they have to accept that.

MH: Right. Do you happen to know any other guys in the 12th Armored Division that are still around, who had different experiences with any of the camps?

JC: Well, I know a lot of the guys—we just got through with a reunion, I guess I told you. It just ended Sunday, and I drove back. I was only in St. Louis a couple days, and flew out here. But yeah, I do. I can give you the names of some of the infantry guys that came in after us. And keep in mind, we were an armored division; we were all on wheels. And the infantry, of course, is normally on the ground, but they rode in the half-tracks until such time as we encountered the enemy, and they dismounted and went out to try and neutralize them. So, they were on wheels, or in half-tracks, and riding only as we were moving forward. And when we encountered any resistance, then they immediately disembarked and were on the ground.

MH: When I send you the email with my address, if you can respond with any other names or phone numbers of guys you think I should talk to that may have different perspectives on what you saw.

JC: Okay. I'll try not to give you any prisoners of war, because we had about 300 or 350 prisoners of war in our division. They were captured mostly at Herrlisheim on January 17, 1944—forty-five [1945]. And they didn't experience this thing because they were prisoners. So, they knew nothing about it. So, I'll just give you the fellows that survived. I got some tankers and some infantry guys and recon guys that witnessed all that.

MH: Okay. That'd be terrific.

JC: I'll try to give you their phone numbers and everything.

MH: Okay. Well, I'll send you an email.

JC: All right.

MH: And I really appreciate your taking the time. I'm sorry I interrupted your time with the grandkids.

JC: Oh, that's okay. I'm okay now, but they were getting ready to eat, and that's when I had to leave.

MH: Okay. Well, thank you again.

JC: Mike, what will be the title of your book?

MH: The working title at the moment is *The Last Liberators: America's Final Witnesses to the Holocaust*. It's going to be published by the Bantam-Dell Division of Random House in early 2010.

JC: You've got a good publisher.

MH: Yes. Yeah, this is my sixth book. I was actually embedded with Air Force pararescue guys in Afghanistan and Pakistan to write a book.¹

JC: Is that right?

MH: Which probably made me the oldest living American in Afghanistan at the time.

JC: (laughs) I guess you read *The Kite Runner*.²

MH: Yes.

¹*None Braver: U.S. Air Force Pararescuemen in the War on Terrorism*, published in 2003.

²A novel by Afghan author Khaled Hosseini, published in 2003. The movie was released in 2007.

JC: That was an extremely interesting book. I couldn't put it down.

MH: Yeah. I'm just sorry the movie didn't do better than it did.

JC: I didn't see the movie. I wanted to see it, but it's always been somewhere else from where I've been. I wanted to see the movie.

MH: It's worth watching. It was really so well done. I mean, very believable. Okay, well, thank you very, very much for your time, sir.

JC: Okay, Mike. You're welcome, and I'll look for your email.

MH: Okay.

JC: Now, listen, I'm not going to be back in St. Louis until about the 3rd of September.

MH: No problem.

JC: So, I'll have to wait until I get back to my office, where I've got all this information. I'll send you a copy of the *Hellcat News* and along with that I'll give you the names and respond by email with the names of some of these guys. All right?

MH: Thank you very much. Take care. Bye-bye.

JC: Okay, Mike. Bye.

End of interview