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Ventura De La Torre oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, August 21, 2008

Ventura De La Torre (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: First of all, can you give me your name and spell it for me, please?

Ventura De La Torre: Ventura De La Torre. Capital D-e-capital L-a-capital T-o-r-r-e.

MH: And your address?

VT: ...

MH: And your phone number?

VT: ...

MH: And what's your date of birth?

VT: June 25, 1924.

MH: What unit were you in?

VT: I was with Cannon Company, 317 Regiment.

MH: Regiment of the 80th Division?

VT: 80th Infantry Division.

MH: Where were you before you went in the Army?

VT: Well, I was at home working.

MH: Where's that?

VT: In La Habra, California.

MH: Okay. What were you doing?

VT: I worked in the citrus groves; that's all there was in Orange County.

MH: In Orange County, okay. So, you were drafted?

VT: Yes.

MH: And where'd they send you?

VT: They sent me to Little Rock, Arkansas. [Camp] Joseph T. Robinson.

MH: Were you one of the original 80th guys?

VT: I joined the Division out of Camp Forrest [Tennessee], 1943.

MH: And went overseas when?

VT: July 1, 1944.

MH: Forty-four [1944]. Did you go on the *Queen Mary*?

VT: Yes.

MH: So, there were a lot of the guys from the division on that ship. You didn't go as a replacement?

VT: Oh, yes. No, no.

MH: Oh, okay. So you get to Europe. Where do you go? What's your first combat?

VT: Our first combat was in Argentan, in France, and it was August 12, 1944.

MH: What was that like for you?

VT: It was quite an experience. (laughs)

MH: (laughs) I'll bet.

VT: Well, being green, you know—from what I hear, we had lost a lot of men. In fact, one of my best buddies was killed the very first day there.

MH: In Cannon Company, what was your job?

VT: I was a truck driver. I was doing a 105 Hauser. We had a crew of, I believe, nine or twelve; I forget now what there was. I was a driver, one of the drivers. We had six guns in our company. But the primary, it was just my driving. We'd unload the ammunition and help the crew with getting the shells ready and everything.

MH: Right. Were you aware of the concentration camps or anything like that?

VT: No, not before, until that day they took us in to see what was going on in there. It was quite a shock see all those people half dead in there. And the people who were dead, stacked up like wood. You could open the barracks in there, and there were so many people in there; they couldn't even move, they were so weak.

MH: When you went in the barracks, what did you see?

VT: Well, those people lined up shoulder to shoulder there, and they were just staring at us. They couldn't believe what was going on, I guess. And they were so weak that a lot of them couldn't even get out. And there were dead with them in there. I don't know when they found out or how they were checked, but I guess they just take them out and just pile them up outside the barracks.

MH: What did you do? You walk in the barracks and you see this. What happens?

VT: I couldn't believe it. It was a terrible sight, and [I was] feeling sorry for these people that they couldn't help themselves; nobody to help them. When we arrived, the people just walking toward us, like asking us, "Get us out of here," that was our feeling.

MH: But they weren't speaking English?

VT: No, no. They were different, I guess, different religions—I mean, nationalities. There were Poles, French. I don't know what the other ones were in there, but there were a lot of them.

MH: What did the ones who were walking look like? Are they dressed?

VT: No—well, some just had a piece of blanket covering them. And their knees were nothing but skin and bone. Their ribs—it was a terrible sight to see them. You see a person like that, and then they're all over the place. From what I hear, the Germans—before they left, they machine-gunned some of these inmates that were in there. The people were half dead already; I don't know why they did that. And when we went in,

some of those guards—from what I hear, they had changed into inmates' dressing, but some of the people recognized them, and they beat them up.

MH: I heard they tore them apart.

VT: I heard that they killed some of them. I didn't see it. And then, they had the ovens there, the skeletons still in there. Oh, it was—the smell, you just—when I think about it, I can almost smell that thing.

MH: How long did you stay in the camp?

VT: Oh, probably about two, three hours, I guess. I don't remember.

MH: Just wandering around?

VT: Just wandering around.

MH: What else did you see there? Were the medics, American medics, already helping these people, or hadn't they arrived yet?

VT: No, I don't know if they were helping them or not. But they had the—we went in, and we went into a room where the showers were at, and it was full of people there, naked: men and women, kids, dead on the floor there.

MH: What's it do to your mind to see that? I mean, how old were you then? You were twenty?

VT: I was twenty years old.

MH: Almost twenty-one.

VT: Yes.

MH: So, what's it do to you to see that?

VT: You know, it's hard to believe what's going on, because we had never seen nothing like that. Everybody went in with a look on their faces like, "Man, what's going on here?" It was terrible.

MH: What was the conversation like among the GIs after you left the camp?

VT: Well, we were all talking about how could this happen? Why did they do this? Why were they killing like that?

MH: Did it change your attitude toward German prisoners?

VT: Well, no, not really. Because after all, we were fighting against—it was either you or me. But no, it never changed, because a lot of them were not at fault. It was the officers and whoever ordered that.

MH: Did you see any other camps?

VT: No, just that one. That's the only camp I saw.

MH: When you came back to the States, did you tell people about it?

VT: Yes, I used to tell them. But you know, people here couldn't imagine what I was talking about. To see all these people that were starved, half dead—no, I don't think they understood what I saw out there.

MH: When's the first time you told your son about it?

VT: Well, I don't recall how old he was, but I told him as soon as he could understand what I had been through. I had books of the Division and pictures that I had taken before. I told him how it was. But you tell a person that's never been in combat or something, they can't imagine what's going on. You know that—you fought, but they don't know what we went through, the suffering. Like I used to tell my kids, I just had a blanket, since I was a driver, and whenever I had a chance, I just curled up with that and just take

a nap, whatever chance I got, because I was on the go most of the time with General [George S.] Patton. We were moving pretty fast.

MH: Where were you when the war ended?

VT: I was in Austria.

MH: In Austria?

VT: In Austria. And then, since I was one of the young guys—they were being discharged by points. And I didn't have any points. I think I had sixty points.

MH: How many did you need to go home?

VT: Oh, about—I don't really recall what it was. Maybe I had less than that, because all the married men were going home first because they got five points for each child, and then they got points for being in the Army, how many months you were in the Army, and how long you had been overseas. And then, for every decoration, you got five points. So, it varied.

MH: So, you were there for a while.

VT: I was there for a while.

MH: When did you get home?

VT: I arrived in the States the 28th of December, 1945.

MH: And got right out of the service?

VT: No, right after that, the 28th of December, then we celebrated New Year's in New York, Times Square, and I was discharged the 8th of January, 1946.

MH: So, what'd you do the rest of your life? What kind of job did you have?

VT: Oh, I married. I'm married for sixty-two years. I worked in the—the first job right after that, I wanted to go to work. I got a job in a foundry because that was the first place that I looked for. I stayed there for—well, I did that kind of work for eleven years, making soil pipe. First a molder's helper and then I became a molder, and then I used to rend pipe, soil pipe. I did that kind of work for about eleven years. And then I did a little welding, and then I got a job with the City of Fullerton. I worked there twenty-seven years and retired. In the meantime, I got bored, because I was working the graveyard driving the street sweeper. I liked it because it was—

MH: It's quiet.

VT: —midnight to seven o'clock in the morning. It was boring staying home after that, so I went to barber college, and I worked as a barber for about twenty-six years on the side. So, that's what I did.

MH: How many kids? How many children?

VT: I have three, one boy and two girls.

MH: And grandchildren?

VT: Four grandchildren and one great-grandson. He's a year old now.

MH: Well, thank you very, very much. I appreciate it.

VT: Thank you.

MH: Okay. And thanks for doing what you did.

VT: Thank you.

End of interview