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Albin F. Irzyk oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, May 28, 2008

Albin F. Irzyk (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, and I want to hear you pronounce it.

Albin F. Irzyk: Yes, Brigadier General Albin F. Irzyk.

MH: Irzyk, I-r-z-y-k.

AI: Right.

MH: All right. And your date of birth is—

AI: 2 January 1917.

Pause in recording

AI: (looking at maps) So, we're advancing to the east. This is what became East Germany. We crossed to the place called Hersfeld, which is the last city in West Germany, before we crossed. We crossed—when we left Hersfeld, we—

Pause in recording

AI: —on this map. And this was my advance. This is in late March, early April. To orient you, this is Erfurt. The (inaudible) map was called Erfurt.

MH: E-r-f-u-r-t.

AI: All right. This is Gotha, which enters prominently into our conversation, and here's Ohrdruf.

MH: Okay. So, how many miles south would you say south of Gotha—

AI: Each square is a kilometer.

MH: Each square, okay.

AI: So, this is Gotha, this is Ohrdruf—one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen kilometers from the center of Gotha. So, this is the Ohrdruf we're talking about. And this is probably the patch of woods where the concentration camp was, because it was a large wooded area.

MH: About how large, would you say?

AI: Hmm?

MH: How large would you say it was?

AI: About that large, I'd say. I didn't run around it. All I know it was thick and deep when I was in it. But the extent of it, there's no way of measuring it.

MH: When you're moving, how many tanks in your unit?

AI: In my battalion, if we were at full strength, I had three medium tank battalions. I had three medium tank companies, 17/17/17. I had light tank companies, seventeen tanks, and I had two tanks that were headquarters tanks, my tank and my S-3 tank, and we had five assault guns that were mounted on the Sherwin chassis and they gave us indirect fire. So it gave me a total, at full strength, of seventy-six tanks in the battalion. But we were never at full strength.

MH: At the time of the liberation of Ohrdruf, you were the battalion commander?

AI: Yes, I was.

MH: Okay. And your rank at the time?

AI: Lieutenant colonel. Yeah.

MH: Lieutenant colonel, okay. And when you're moving, I assume this is your path that you marked out here.

AI: Yeah. Now, we had a terrible—right in here, we're following the Autobahn. And they had a bunch of 88s, so we had a scrap here. Then we went back on this road into Gotha. See, we were barreling down the Autobahn and we'd been moving rapidly.

MH: And your ultimate goal was to go to—?

AI: Our ultimate goal was Dresden. But prior to Dresden, there's a place called Kemnitz. Kemnitz is a big city; it's off this map. If we need to, I can get the other map; it's on the other side.

MH: No, that's okay.

AI: When we got to the outskirts of Kemnitz, I was pulled off the road. I was talking on my radio when my combat commander rapped on the tank and he says, "Hey, you've gone twenty-five miles beyond the restraining line." That's the first I'd ever heard of the restraining line. Where I was, if you went north, you'd be up to Berlin where the powers that be had agreed on the restraining line. So, that was Kemnitz, but we were heading—

Dresden was beyond, that was deep into the other side. So we got to the outskirts of Kemnitz, turned around and came back and then went south.

MH: To come back to the Ohrdruf situation, you've come to Gotha, and just tell me the story.

AI: Yeah, I'll tell you the story. We'll come in—do you want me to do it in here?

MH: No, we can go sit down, if you'd rather sit down.

AI: I'll tell you what, why don't you read that?

MH: Okay.

Pause in recording

MH: (adjusts recorder) Okay. Let me just—

AI: We're going to discuss it, is that right? You're going to record it?

MH: Absolutely. (mutters about recorder) If not, it's okay. I can just set it here. You can sit back and relax, and I'll just set it here. It'll be fine.

AI: Want to hook it up here somewhere?

MH: Yeah.

AI: I can loosen it if you want to.

MH: It'll be just fine. Okay. I've read your bio online, so I know a little bit about you. When did your unit actually leave the States, going to Germany?

AI: We left the States about the twenty-eighth of December 1943.

MH: And you went to where?

AI: We went to a place called Devizes, England, and it's in a place called Wiltshire near Salisbury Plains. And we were there until we went into Normandy. And that's where [George S.] Patton assembled his 3rd Army.

MH: And then, how long had you been there before you finally got to the situation that we're going to talk about? You had been fighting through the Battle of the Bulge—

AI: Well, we had a—we zigzagged all of Europe. If you want to hear it, I'll give you the highlights.

MH: Just the highlights.

AI: Yeah. We didn't get into Normandy until the thirteenth of July, because the infantry had a hard time making a bridgehead large enough. An armored division is a massive unit. We broke out of Normandy on July 28. We went south into Brittany. At that point, we were poised to go east, but the powers that be had wanted ports that they thought they would need in Brittany. So, they turned us west, and my division went all the way to the Atlantic, which was a 500-mile round trip that was totally, totally worthless. The leaders were hewing to their pre-plans for that area, and we had moved so rapidly that we'd outrun them. And there, when we made that round trip, we were headed east, and during August, Patton—one of the cornerstones, the foundations of his military immortality, was the sweep that we made across France during the last two weeks in August.

We got to the Meuse River, and we were poised to continue on. We had traveled 328 miles, advanced in twelve days. When we got to the Meuse River, we were sixty miles from the German border and another eighty miles to the Rhine River. Eighty and sixty is 140 miles. We'd already gone 328 in twelve days. Patton said, "We'll be at the Rhine in ten days." I believed him. At that point, the world knows that Patton ran out of gasoline. Patton didn't run out of gasoline; [Dwight D.] Eisenhower gave the gasoline to [Bernard Law] Montgomery. He had the priority supplies. He's the one who came up with an operation called Market Garden, which was a total, total disaster, and there was a vacuum for supplies.

Patton, the great offensive weapon, sat for five weeks as it rained and rained and rained, and we didn't resume the attack until November 8. By that time, the fields were so boggy that the tanks couldn't move in the fields, and it got to be a one-tank front. So we slug, slug, slug all the way to the Maginot Line, a place called Singling. When we got there, it was the seventh of December, and at that time we'd gone five weeks without a hot meal, five weeks without a minute of maintenance.

MH: Are you a battalion commander by then, or are you a company commander?

AI: No, I became battalion commander on December 3. I was executive officer in the S-3 prior to that.

When we got to the German border, in the Maginot Line, someone said, "You guys need a break." So, we were pulled back and we were given a few days to rehabilitate. We were going to return to the border and continued across the border into Germany, into the Saar. But something happened north of us on the sixteenth of December, which was the Ardennes battle. And Patton turned his army 90 degrees and moved to Bastogne. And my battalion led 3rd Army, because the 4th Armored Division led the army. My combat command led the Division, my battalion led the combat command, and because there was only one map in the hands of the combat commander, he was the one that guided us.

We got to the outskirts of Bastogne, and the next day I had a task force in Bastogne, on the twentieth of December, which is the day it was being surrounded. And the world does not know, not too many people know that Patton had forces in Bastogne the day it was being surrounded. But he had been at Verdun. He promised to attack in forty-eight hours with three divisions. And if he had left the combat command, he would have been depleted. So, he pulled us right back, and on the twenty-second of December, we attacked. It was our division that relieved the 101st Airborne [Division], the Battered Bloody Bastards of Bastogne.

We pulled back, and we were attacking to the east. And on the eleventh of January, we were attacking with the 101st Airborne, 6th Armored Division, three divisions abreast. We were summarily pulled back and rushed to Luxembourg. Apparently, the powers that be had indications there would be another counterattack, so we rushed to Luxembourg. We got to Luxembourg, nothing happened. So, we sat. The tanks sat at Luxembourg, but the infantry went down to the Our and Sauer River, which separated Germany from—I mean, Luxembourg from Germany.

After the infantry was able to get through the Siegfried Line and get a bridgehead, we attacked and we went to the Rhine River. All the bridges were out. We finally crossed the

Rhine River, went north, east of Frankfurt, up toward the place that I said, Bad Hersfeld, which was the last city in West Germany. We crossed, left Bad Hersfeld. We went into a city called Eisenach, which is in East—what became East Germany, what was East Germany then, and that's where we picked up on my map.

MH: When you say that you're moving, how fast are tanks moving?

AI: Well, there were days when we moved rapidly; there were days when we didn't move at all. It all depended on the resistance. Now, in the August events, tank conditions were absolutely perfect. The days were long, the nights short, the fields were dry, we could move anywhere, the creeks or rivers were low, and the enemy was scattered. And once we got behind them—because of our maneuverability, we got behind them. Once we got behind them, they lost their will to fight, except the fanatics, so we were able to advance rapidly.

In December, the Germans had the advantage. We couldn't maneuver in the fields, so they picked the spots for their anti-tank guns. They blew mines—they planted mines. They blew craters in the roads. And they had—so we slug, slug, slug. If we went three, four, five miles, we were fortunate. So, it depended upon the conditions and the enemy.

MH: As you get to the point where you're going to be ordered to turn to look for this underground complex, your goal at that point was to continue going to Dresden.

AI: Absolutely. We were streaking to—except when we had this battle the day before, but they were laying for us because we were on the Autobahn. And we used the Autobahn; that was the fastest way. It was a gamble, but we chose to gamble. So, we were hit. But once we recovered, the next day we went on to Gotha.

MH: What's the radio message you got, or the message you get that says, "Go look for this underground—"

AI: It wasn't a radio.

MH: It wasn't?

AI: No, it was Colonel [Hayden] Sears, my combat commander. I get out of my tank; he's on the side of the road. He gives it to me orally.

MH: And tell me what he said to you.

AI: He said to me that there were indications that there's an underground complex, communications equipment, and it was designed for the headquarters of the German Army in case they had to evacuate from Berlin. So he says, "It's a big communications complex and it's underground, so look for it."

MH: When you get an order like that, what do you think? I mean, how're you gonna find it?

AI: Well, if it's there, we'll find it. Yeah.

MH: But as a military commander, what goes through your head? What do I now have to do? I mean, it's different than saying "Go from point A to point B in your tanks."

AI: No, he said, "Go to Ohrdruf and look for this complex." The minute we left Gotha, we start hitting resistance, so we have to fight our way to Gotha. And I've got my tanks—this is April, the ground is dry; I had them spread out as we advanced. And if there was a complex, one of my tanks would have found it. You couldn't hide a complex. So, we thought that as we moved, we would uncover the complex.

But we got to Ohrdruf, and it was getting dark. I outposted—there were two towns beyond Ohrdruf. "Seize that, seize that," and we cut all the roads. And then my—we put outposts out, and we dug in for the night. But prior to that, as I mentioned, I started getting indications about bodies, bodies. It was one of my light tanks, and that was the first one into Ohrdruf.

MH: When you say indications, again, this is on the radio?

AI: No, talking. This is a tank commander talking to his company commander. See, I was a battalion commander. I talked to the company commander. The company commanders talk to the platoon leaders. But every now and then I would switch, so I could pick up chatter. But I was concerned with the military battle then, and uncovering the underground complex.

MH: So, you begin to hear this chatter about bodies.

AI: Yeah, about bodies, but I thought nothing about it, and then once night settled, it's dark. It looked to me, from what I heard, that it was something that was unusual, something we hadn't seen before. So, I saw for myself. I waited until daylight and saw for myself.

MH: Describe what happened. You slept at your tank, or in your tank?

AI: Yeah.

MH: Okay. Daylight comes—

AI: Daylight. Now, my outfit is—we're not moving. We're sitting. So, the situation is pretty stable at that point. So, now it's my opportunity to check out the bodies.

MH: Are you comfortable sitting and taking the time to check out the bodies, or—

AI: What do you mean, sitting?

MH: Well, you're staying in one place. Are you comfortable doing that, or do you know that you're going to hear down the chain of command from Patton, saying, "You guys should be moving."

AI: No, no, no. No, I'm talking—my immediate commander was Colonel Sears. He was commander of CCA [Combat Command A]. In an armored division—I don't know if you're familiar with it, but we used to have regiments. But in forty-three [1943], we reorganized, and we had combat commands in the armored division. 4th Armored Division on up—1st, 2nd, and 3rd Armored stayed with regiments. 4th Armored and all the ones afterwards were lighter armored divisions. Well, when you had regiments, all logistics was in the regiments and the battalions were just the fighting elements. Now, when they reconfigured the armored division, the combat commands were just tactical headquarters. They would command and operate whatever units were needed for a particular job.

Now, the battalions were self-sufficient. In addition to my four tank companies, I had a headquarters company with mortars, recon [reconnaissance] and assault guns, and I had a service company, a tremendous service company. They were the ones who brought me all my supplies, my ammunition. They were the ones that had a maintenance section. So, the battalion was a self-sufficient unit. But the CCA, CCB, and we had a reserve command, but we also called it CCR, three combat tactical headquarters. But on this operation, my CCA commander was Colonel Hayden Sears. He got his directives from Division.

So, after we got to Ohrdruf, we continued moving out, searching—but at that time, we had stopped. The orders to go east now were dropped in favor of this. So, we were going to stay in the area a while. When my opportunity came to go to see the bodies, everything was quiet. I had the outposts out and the people moving.

MH: So, this is a forested area?

AI: Where I went, yeah, it was a forested area. I left my tank, got in a Jeep—my Jeep. I had a Jeep, but that was always behind, but they came up if I needed it. I got into my Jeep and I drove to where I was told to; my subordinates told me where to go. I got there and there was this woods, too thick for the Jeep. I got out of the Jeep and I walked through the woods.

And the first thing—I walked through the woods and the first thing I saw was this clearing. And I just couldn't believe what I saw. But as I mentioned there, I looked out, and I could see, in an elliptical circle, bodies. The feet were this way and the heads were back out. And it was—I was absolutely stunned. I'd never seen anything like this before and never expected to see anything like it. But finally I walked up, and there, each man had a little red spot here, a red spot. And these were thin, emaciated, ragged people in this elliptical circle.

MH: Each had been shot either in the forehead or—

AI: Shot in the head or in the throat, one shot. Looked like a small, small shot.

MH: What goes through your mind?

AI: Incomprehensible. What is this? What is this? See, as I mentioned, at that point we had never heard of concentration camps. You know, the Russians had run over them, but we didn't. And maybe they were—and I think some of our leaders were really unaware of

it. There were undercurrents about concentration camps, but I don't think—the impact never came until we got to Ohrdruf.

MH: I mean, they knew they had them in Poland.

AI: Yeah, some. Yeah, but we were not aware of it, we troopers fighting the war. But maybe our leaders were certainly well aware of it. But to see it—it's a staggering, staggering—

MH: Do you try and sort it out?

AI: Trying to sort it out, yeah. What is this? How did this happen? But that's step one. And then you open this door. As you get to this building, this horrible smell. You open the door, and there again, another unbelievable shock. You've got these bodies that—they're like skeletons without clothing, but all sorts of marks and bruises, covered with lime—like cordwood, from the floor to the ceiling, just stacked there. So, you open the door, and you look at it. This is unbelievable! You'd never seen anything like it. You can't comprehend it.

MH: Do you have to control your reactions 'cause your men are watching you?

AI: Sure. Absolutely! Patton tried to; he vomited, you know. Yeah, it's tough. And then from—that was step two, and then as we roam around, the third step was the disposal pits. And by that time, the pattern emerges. You know now what this is. But this is totally unexpected, you never heard anything about it, and then suddenly you're confronted with it. This is, as I mentioned, unbelievable. It makes an impact that is unforgettable.

MH: And then survivors start appearing.

AI: Yeah, I didn't see the survivors. The survivors came out later. That was my one visit. I didn't return. But the men in my battalion went; everyone that could be spared went. And then when Eisenhower got there, he said, "I want every man who's not otherwise employed. Come see this. You must see this." So, I'm sure many hundreds of men came, because following us were divisions; the infantry divisions were behind us. And their job was—if we went cross-country and bypassed places, they had to come up and clean those out. But they were well behind us.

MH: Could you hazard a guess as to how many bodies there were in that camp?

AI: Well, I saw, I would say, 60 to probably 75 in this elliptical circle. In the shed, because of the skeletons, I would say probably 30; and then in the pit there were about—I saw about 200 in the pit. You know, before they—they were ready for burning, but they had not yet been burned. So the total number I saw was about 75 and about 30 more in the sheds and 200. But apparently the SS guards—someone questioned the SS guards—not I—indicating there were hundreds and hundreds, maybe 2,000 to 3,000 that were burned from December until April. So this is a big—but it had to be, because as I mentioned, the ash was shin-high and the skulls were all over the place. We saw fragments of skin that had not burned. So, this was a big operation.

MH: What kind of a day was it?

AI: Pretty day, when I saw it. Sunny.

MH: So, it's like you've walked into something that's—how did you report back to Colonel Sears?

AI: Well, I told him what I saw. I told him exactly what I saw. And he came and saw it. And he's the one—I've read articles where Patton ordered this. It was not Patton. It was Colonel Hayden Sears. He went to the city. He had about thirty of these high—I guess high-ranking citizens of this town, and as I described in there, he had them walk around. I was not there. He was escorting them, and he was a big burly guy, a no-nonsense guy. They were under his orders. And by that time, you know, we had overrun them.

MH: I've heard the story, as you repeated there, about the *bürgermeister* and his wife hanging themselves. Do you think that's credible?

AI: Absolutely! It's not credible, it's a fact. It's a fact. As I say in there, they were the only honest ones. Now, this I can't support—I can't support—but someone on Hayden Sears' staff—probably with him; he must have gone to the *bürgermeister*'s house—said they saw utensils with bone handles on them. I can't verify this, but—

MH: I've heard that, and I've also heard stories about lampshades.

AI: Well—yeah, lampshades is absolutely true. I'm talking about Ohrdruf, that in the home of the mayor there were ladles and things in the kitchen that were made with bone handles. I can't verify that, but it's believable because yes, they made lampshades and other things.

MH: You're a soldier. You're a career soldier. You've seen combat in all its ugliness. Does anything match up to this?

AI: No. No, as I mentioned, I saw my men. The first two dead Germans I ever saw were at Normandy, when we were waiting to break out, and I was roving, trying to learn lessons. I came across a German tank, it was a light tank, had been knocked out. I was roaming the area. This is where the 4th Infantry had gone. I was roaming the area with my Jeep. I got out of my Jeep, and this tank was buttoned up. The hatches were closed. I opened up the hatch, and there were two Germans sitting there, burned to a crisp. It was like black toast. Those were the first two Germans that I ever saw, dead Germans.

But I saw Germans, we've hit German tanks, they burned. I saw my tanks burned. I saw my men burned. I went back to the aid station one day and a guy's lying on the table, my battalion surgeon. And you talk about guts being—it looked as though someone had sliced him. So, we saw some terrible things. But when we saw this—unbelievable, unbelievable, because we soon learned that it was human beings that were doing this to other human beings. So, it was—I still think of it from time to time.

MH: Is this the sort of thing that changes somebody's life?

AI: Change what?

MH: Is this the sort of thing that changes someone's life?

AI: Yeah. I'm sure it would, depending on the individual. It didn't change my life. I was hardened; I had seen these things. This was just another shock. And see, later, my wife and I visited Dachau. I was in the occupation, married her, and she went over, so we saw other bad things. It didn't change my life, but it sure left a notch in my life.

MH: I've asked other soldiers if seeing this had any impact on their belief in God. Some say yes, some say no.

AI: Well, I'm a believer in God. He saved my life on the twenty-third of December. Going up to Bastogne, my tank was hit and I was wounded, and it was a miracle that saved me.

MH: That's the six-inch piece of metal?

AI: Yeah. Oh, you read that? And that day, I honestly felt that there was someone over my left shoulder. I was a believer before that, but if I needed some believing, I knew then.

MH: But then you see something like Ohrdruf.

AI: Yeah, and then Ohrdruf.

MH: How do you—you can't make it compute.

AI: No. Well, it's hard to unravel, hard to unravel. Another thing: when the war ended in Europe on V-Day—which was just recently, eighth of May—we were in Czechoslovakia, a place called Veliny. The eighth comes. Every inhabitant of Veliny, under the thumb of the Germans for all the months and months and months, now they're free. So, there's all sorts of celebrating, wine and dancing and kissing. And our men participated a little bit, but there was less celebrating by our soldiers than there was in San Francisco or New York or Washington. And the reason is all of us, I think, had a bit of a guilty feeling that our guys were now safe, the war's over. We're going home eventually, and these guys were going to stay over. So it—and I say they—why was it they and not me? I ran the same dangers, probably more dangers than some of them, but I made it. There's someone up there that controls our destiny. So, I'm a believer. And the sights I saw there didn't turn me away.

MH: Did you have to have any conversations with your men as a group, as a commander talking to your men about being able to move on after seeing something as horrible as this?

AI: Yeah. In combat, it was difficult. But from time to time, if there was a lull—I remember particularly one time I had to get them together about looting—and fraternization. This is late in the war. There's a fraternization ban, and we had heard rumors that other units were looting. So, I got them all together, and I said, "Listen, we've been through the war, you've done a tremendous job, you're a bunch of great soldiers, you're a bunch of heroes. Now's not the time to uh, fudge it up." So, yeah. I

don't remember—I didn't have an opportunity to get to them on this, but I did get them together from time to time.

MH: In the remaining months of the war, did you see anything else like Ohrdruf?

AI: Nothing like Ohrdruf. At Dachau—

MH: That was after the war.

AI: That was after the war, yeah.

MH: But while the war was still on?

AI: No, not in the war. Let me see. From Ohrdruf, no. No, it was easier going. When we got to Kemnitz, we turned around, and I recall the Germans were following in front of our Jeeps. They didn't want us to leave; they knew the Russians would come, believe it or not. But anyway, we moved back, we went over 200 miles to the south to the Danube, and we went into Czechoslovakia from the southwest. But no, nothing could compare to that.

MH: This is slightly off the subject, but when I began working on this, I was really trying to figure out some of the most basic things, and I tried to figure out how large a country Germany is. And I worked it out in square miles. It's only slightly larger than New Mexico: slightly smaller than Montana, slightly larger than New Mexico.

AI: Oh, no.

MH: In square miles. Yes. And I just found it hard to believe that—I said this is going to sound silly—but that a place that small could cause so much grief in the world.

AI: Well, I've thought that, too—not only the grief, but the fact that they were able to crank up a military machine that fought the Russians and fought us. They had the sophisticated aircraft, they had the buzz bombs, they had gasoline, they had the 88, which was the best gun in the war. And to create the number of units, divisions, the massive number of divisions they had, the pilots from this small, small country—it's unbelievable.

But then, I cannot comprehend—to me, one of the great enigmas of my life is [Adolf] Hitler. Here's this guy—you got time to talk?

MH: Yes, I have plenty of time.

AI: Yeah. Hitler. Couldn't get through high school. He's not a German, he's an Austrian. He has, he thinks, a great skill for painting, but he's rudimentary. He becomes a bum in Vienna. He's drafted into the German army. He's in the German army for four years and advances; because of his great leadership, he's still a corporal. When the war ends, he's gassed. He's in a hospital. He's in his late thirties by then. And for him to be what he later became, it's just incomprehensible. But more than that, at Nuremberg, in the stadium, 100,000 people, "Heil Hitler! Heil Hitler!"—beyond my comprehension. I can't figure out how all that happened. But you got the ruling class, the great industrialists, the Krupps and folks like that. They were in the palm of his hand. They were Heil Hitler-ing this Austrian corporal.

MH: But also, to be able to get an entire country to look the other way and say, "If you say so!"

AI: That's right, that's right. He talked with an accent, but he had a gift. He mesmerized them.

MH: Anything else you can tell me about—?

AI: Well, Ohrdruf was a small—compared to what we did throughout the war, it was just a few days, a stop. But the magnitude of it was just—

MH: They didn't have you brief any other division people?

AI: No. What we did—we were there. And when the division—I guess Patton to the division, division to Hayden Sears—said, "Move. Tomorrow, we're going to move," tomorrow we moved, and we left all that behind us and pulled the shade. Our job was fighting. And we learned later about Eisenhower and Patton's visit on the twelfth; we learned later about other things.

End of interview