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Don Latimer oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, August 3, 2008

Don Latimer (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.]

MH: You're Donald Latimer, L-a-t-i-m-e-r?

DL: Yeah. It's not Donald; it's plain old "Don."

MH: Just Don. Okay, what's your address, please?

DL: ...

MH: And your phone is....

DL: You got it.

MH: And what's your date of birth?

DL: June 16, 1918.

MH: June 16 is our anniversary.

DL: Oh, it is?

MH: And what unit were you in?

DL: I was in the 36th Cavalry Reconnaissance Troop. That was the reconnaissance for the 36th Infantry Division, which originally was the Texas National Guard.

MH: What was their nickname?

DL: I'm sorry.

MH: Did they have a nickname?

DL: Well, they called it the "T Patcher".

MH: The "T-Patcher"?

DL: Yeah, "T-Patcher" because they wore a little T-patch, a shoulder patch, a little outline arrowhead on your shoulder with a blue background and "T" in the middle of it.

MH: You'd sent me an e-mail which describes what you'd seen with this particular train, but you also mentioned you'd seen other camps.

DL: Well, I hope I didn't say "other camps." I'd seen other individuals. I don't believe I ever saw another camp. As we moved along, the German army was retreating, most of the time that we were in contact with them, which was a long time, and they often left behind these guys in prison uniforms with the Star of David on the back of them, and that's—I don't know that I ever saw any other prison camps. I don't believe we did.

MH: But you saw the people with the Star of David on it?

DL: Yes, on their back.

MH: And they were where?

DL: Well, that would've been just about anywhere where we went, from—our first combat was in southern Italy, and we'd see them quite often as the Germans would leave a position and we'd move in. Not a lot of times, but they were working for the Germans, I guess digging ditches and trenches and stuff like that, and they'd leave them quite frequently. And I'm guessing these guys, of course, took off as often as they could to get away from the Germans, of course.

MH: So, tell me about this train.

DL: Well, it was in late April; it might've been early May. We were going on a long reconnaissance. We'd crossed the River Rhine at Ludwigshafen, Germany, and had not had much opposition, and we're heading southeast. At that time, the Germans were reported to be holding up in southern Germany, and they were going to try to hold out for an indefinite period of time—the German army, that is. And we were going along, we're the reconnaissance. We were usually leading the division as far as the first people were concerned that came into contact with Germans. Didn't have a lot of opposition. Somewhere—I think I told you it could've been Dachau, but I looked on the map, and Dachau is too close to Munich for that to have been Dachau, because [we] never got into Munich. We got real close, but never been to Munich. We went on to a place called Bad Tölz.

MH: T-ö-l-z.

DL: T-ö-l-z. That's in southern Germany. It's southwest from Munich and north of Innsbruck, Austria, maybe a little northeast of Innsbruck, Austria.

And we were doing the reconnaissance down the highway, leading for the division. And, of course, I'm a radio operator, a radio sergeant, and I was in an armored car. I looked up, and there were guys getting out and going up toward this train, which was parked on a siding in some little town. It seems to me like it might've been closer to Landsberg. I know we did go into Landsberg.

MH: But you think this is early in May.

DL: Well, probably more likely the end of April, because we got into Bad Tölz the second of May, and I know we were surprised. It snowed like the dickens that day, the day we got into Bad Tölz, and we had run into quite a bit of opposition around Bad Tölz. But this was a day or two before that. And this train—or seemed like a half a dozen cars or more; they were boxcars. They had nailed—I guess the Germans had nailed boards across the doors and nailed them shut, and inside were these people who were the German—we called them “German Jews,” and they were in this—you can’t imagine what kind of shape, you know. A good many of them were dead. Some were half-dead, and women with kids, and they had no sanitary facilities. And I understand they’d been nailed up in there for several weeks.

And all they had is a little straw to sleep on. And the story was, now, I don’t know this is true, and I think it wasn’t, the German train crew had been shuttling back and forth from the east where the Russians were approaching and from the west where we were and finally had to abandon them and when we got there, the German train crew had disappeared. I mean, nobody ever found them. And I don’t know if they were military train crew or civilians or what.

And we were the ones who were able to, out of these cars, and set up some tents and they came up, the medics came up, and some of the younger guys that were still in fairly good condition went into this little town. This was a little village, and word came back that we had to go pick them up because they were trying to kill the Germans, any Germans who were left in the town. I’m talking about German civilians, and there were no civilians at that time in Germany except young kids and old people and women, because all the young guys had been put in the service, you know.

So, we rounded them up and put them into these tents, and they put some barbed wire around them, and they gave them rations, and the medics came up, and we left them. I’m sure we were not there more than a day with them, maybe less than that, and we went on our way.

MH: You were traveling in an armored car, you said?

DL: Yes, sir.

MH: So, you see this train parked on the main track or siding?

DL: I believe it was on a siding, as I recall.

MH: And can you hear things?

DL: Well, I don't recall. It's been so long. I don't recall hearing anything in particular, except some of the guys yelling, "There's people in the train," and stuff like that. I didn't actually—I got right up to the train, but I was working the radio all the time and could see everything, because you can lower the hatch down on those armored cars, and that's the way you got in and out of the cars, with the hatch. And you can see everything that's going on.

MH: Tell me in as much detail as you can. What you remember seeing? You said they'd used boards to nail the doors shut?

DL: I remember seeing these boards. This is before any Germans came out of the thing, when we first saw the train. The boards were nailed across, maybe like—oh, looked like maybe 1-by-6s, maybe 2-by-6s, they nailed across the train doors. They closed the doors and nailed the boards on them from the outside where it'd be practically impossible for a person to get out. And our guys in our outfit and, by that time, a lot of other 36th Division companies were up there, too, started prying the boards off the doors. And they let the Germans out.

MH: You're in the armored car talking on the radio at this point?

DL: Yes, I was on the radio all the time.

MH: Who are you talking to?

DL: Well, we talked to our division headquarters and to our platoons. We had three platoons, and my job was to keep in radio contact with the three platoons and what they were doing, and then relay information back to division headquarters. Sometimes regimental headquarters, but it was our headquarters we kept in contact. That was the job we did, and we had two radio operators in the car: when you weren't operating the radio, you were either a driver or a gunner or a car commander, and you alternated. Well, twelve hours a day is what it amounted to.

MH: And these radios are permanently mounted in the cars? It's not the big square guys?

DL: Yes, they were. SCR, Service Corps Radio, I think it's a 520, but I'm not sure of that now. They were permanent mounted in there, and we used—if we were in close range, we could use voice communications. If we were very far away, we had to use CW [continuous wave], which is a dot-dash system.

MH: What were you using at this point?

DL: I think we were using voice, because we were pretty close to the platoons. As I recall, we were.

MH: You see your guys ripping the boards off the train doors. Did they have to use crowbars or—

DL: I think they probably used some bars and things that came out of some of the trucks. I don't recall. They used to carry bars and stuff to use when they're trying to get into a building or something, and most of those were carried in a wheel box on the armored cars. We had huge wheel boxes on there, but I don't know what they were actually—they weren't designed for opening up railroad cars. They were probably designed for getting into a house or knocking down a door on a house or something like that.

MH: These railroad cars were the old 40-by-8s?

DL: Yeah, the same size as the 40-by-8s, yeah. The 40-by-8s were French cars, but I guess the German cars are about the same size. It was 40-and-8s is what they were: forty men or eight horses.

MH: Right, and so—which I always found weird, that they would build freight cars to carry people. I just thought that was strange.

DL: Well, it seems unusual, but they did that. We rode a good many of those over the years in North Africa. We rode them all the way from Sidi Bel Abbès [Algeria] to Rabat [Morocco] in those similar type cars. We had straw in the cars, and we usually stopped at night, because we were out of combat at that time, but they were not exactly comfortable.

MH: You're seeing the people break open the train cars, and how many cars did you think there were?

DL: I'd guess six or eight. I don't remember exactly. And I don't recall the engine was even there; it might've been, but I don't recall anything about the engine at all.

MH: So, they open it, and the people—they have to help the people out?

DL: Yeah, they have to help them out. Some of the guys looked like they were in pretty good shape, and most of them had on these prison-type uniforms, but some of them had on regular civilian clothes. They were pretty ragged. They weren't all in uniforms, as I recall.

MH: Were there dead people still in the cars?

DL: There were dead people, you could see them. They looked like they were dead. And I'm sure they were dead, because they said they'd been in there several weeks.

MH: And so then the people come down. Are they looking for food, for water?

DL: They're looking for anything, I think, and the ones that were able-bodied were certainly angry and perturbed, and we gave them food and water as quick as we could. They didn't—they got C rations, which is what we had, you know, but that to them probably tasted pretty good. But I think when we got them in tents there they brought in a few kitchens, because that type of place there was no German opposition at all in that particular area that I recall. The Germans had already moved on.

MH: What's the conversation between the GIs at this point?

DL: Well, they were pretty doggone mad, angry over what had happened. And as it occurred, probably just the last day or two of the war, where we came up to a little town called Lenggries, L-e-n-g-g-r-i-e-s, south of Bad Tölz. That's where we were when the war was over, right near there, and this little community on the river, I believe the Isar River, but I'm not real sure, I've forgotten the name of the river.

MH: That's the I-s-a-r?

DL: Yes, that's what I believe it was. I have it in my records, but I don't know what it is now. And we came up on this town and getting into German opposition. In other words, they had roadblocks, and we couldn't get into town, and we called for artillery getting ready to shell this town to run the Germans out, and it took them awhile to move up. And this German—I guess he was mayor, or they called him *Bürgermeister*—came out of this town in an old German car, not a military car, waving a white flag and told us that they were thousands, many, many thousands of German wounded in town, it was a hospital town.

They had a bunch of hospitals there, and they had a lot of hospitals in southern Germany because southern Germany was, by and large, not damaged like the areas around Berlin and places like that. And our officers or captain said, "Oh, the hell with them. They're killing the Jews. If you saw what we saw a few days ago, let's just go in and shell," and use the term "the bastards," you know. And a little while later, a colonel, might've been a major, came up from one of the regiments and this guy was still there, and he ordered the artillery not to shell the town. Because it would just kill a bunch of wounded German soldiers, you know, and that's the only specific incident I can recall.

Our guys did have—one of our platoons was ambushed right about that same time, which several guys got killed and some of them badly wounded. And the German—some German nurses, military nurses, came up—they had on nurse's uniforms—to doctor our guys, and the Germans executed those nurses and killed them. We were fighting the SS at that time. And I'll never forget that, because it's just a terrible thing, you know.

MH: The Germans killed their own nurses?

DL: Yeah, they killed their own nurses because they were taking care of the GIs. And that was also just south of Bad Tölz, probably two or three miles. They just threw a roadblock up across the road. We went down both sides of that river on, oh, not a highway but at least an old road, you know. And then Bad Tölz, itself, was a hospital town. When we got into Bad Tölz, they had—we'd stopped in front of this big building. Turned out it was a German military hospital, and the German army had already evacuated south, and the first sergeant and captain and I were standing in front of the armored car, and a sniper shot the first sergeant right through the leg. Didn't kill him. And they took him—the Germans took him in. German nurses—again, there—took him into the German hospital and dressed his wounds, and he took command of the hospital. It was an interesting situation.

MH: You said in the e-mail that the encounter with the trainload of Jews was one of the most traumatic events of the war for you, and you'd been in the war for a long, long time.

DL: Yeah, we were overseas twenty-seven months. We started in combat in Salerno, a beachhead, on September 9, 1943. And of course the war ended for us, I think it was May 7 [1945], maybe, the official day, or the eighth. The war kind of ended at different times, depending on what area you were in, you know. But for us, I think it was on the seventh. We were in combat the greater part of that. I'd remember times we were out training and retaining, and such as that, and we made two amphibious landings and also landed at Anzio. But Anzio was not an amphibious landing; they'd put in docks. There was shelling (inaudible) in there.

MH: You'd seen a lot of killing, a lot of death.

DL: Well, yeah, most of the killing, though, was of German soldiers and our soldiers. But I hadn't seen much of—certainly we saw the dead civilians everywhere you were, but not necessarily in a group of prisoners or anything like that, you know.

MH: I mean, the German mechanism for killing Jews and other people they didn't like was very efficient.

DL: Well, I been to Austria some fifteen years ago and went through—and they demonstrated to us the methods they used for killing the Jews. The biggest problem they had after killing the Jews was how to get rid of the bodies, you know, and they were actually—there was no efficient way of doing it, you know.

MH: But seeing the train really left an impact on you.

DL: It really did. That is by far the saddest thing. I guess mainly because there were women and kids involved, you know?

MH: As I do the research on this book and have talked to 150 guys who were liberators, the more I find it difficult to understand what kind of people can do that.

DL: Well, what I've always had a hard problem understanding is, Mike, is how the German people—I'm talking about not necessarily the military, how the civilian people who lived in these towns, they had to know about this. There's no way in the world they could have places like Dachau, the trains running through with people nailed up in it without knowing about it, and why they didn't do something about it. That has always puzzled me. The Germans, I guess, I can't understand it, but knowing people are under

orders, you do what you're told to do. And in our military, you did what you're told to do. If you thought it was wrong, you could question it and usually get by with it, but that seldom ever happened, you know.

MH: Where did you grow up?

DL: I grew up in northeast Texas.

MH: How old were you when you went in the Army?

DL: I was twenty-two when I went in. Well, let's see, in 1943—I was born—I went in 1941, and it wasn't my birthday yet, so I was twenty-two when I went in and twenty-seven when I got out.

MH: When you came home, did you tell people about what you'd seen?

DL: Yes, I told a lot of people about it. And most people, unless they were there—I don't want to say they don't believe it, but I got a hunch they don't really understand what it was, you know.

MH: How do you think seeing the things you saw, especially with respect to the camps and what the Nazis did to the Jews, how do you think that might've affected your life?

DL: Well, I don't know that it really had any adverse affect on me. I grew up in an area of Texas where Jews themselves were not liked, but they certainly—they weren't treated like the Negroes. They were treated pretty bad where I grew up, like Alabama, you know, in northeast Texas, because we had legions and burned the courthouse and nearby where I lived, one time, lynched a Negro and stuff like that. And Jews were generally—the only ones we came into contact, were merchants, so they usually ran clothing stores or something like that, and they were considered shifty, as we called them, or a little bit crooked.

And I'd never really knew any Jews personally as I grew up, but I did learn to respect two Jews in our outfit, three Jews in our outfit, two of them who transferred to the Air Force. We had a Jew, a lieutenant from New York City who was a Jew, and he was mad. I mean, he hated the Germans because his family had been mistreated in Europe, and he was a guy that any time there's a mission coming up to go kill Jews or go on patrol—

MH: You mean go kill Germans.

DL: He'd say—to kill Germans, I don't mean Jews. He'd say, "I want to go." And that's what killed him. He charged the German machine gun just north of Rome, and the Germans got him. Not that far, just south of Rome between Anzio and Rome. A German machine gun was blocking the road that we wanted to go up, and a colonel came up from the regimental headquarters somewhere and said, "I need somebody to go up the road and see what we can do to get rid of that machine gun." And his name was Lieutenant Gutterman, he says, "Let me go, Colonel." And the rest of us were all scared to death he'd say, "You go with me." He didn't call on me to go with him. He took a couple other guys with him, and it wasn't an hour until these other two guys were back. He was dead, and they sent a (inaudible) up and hauled him back on a Jeep. And he was about six foot three or four [inches], and there he was, laying across that Jeep, deader than a doornail.

MH: Do you remember his first name?

DL: Richard.

MH: Richard Gutterman?

DL: I'm sorry, no. Roger, Roger Gutterman, yeah. Matter of fact, I even have his—I could even give you the address he had at that time in New York City.

MH: In New York City proper?

DL: Well, in the New York area. It might not've been in New York, the Bronx or somewhere like that, but he was from there. He was a super good guy, well-educated man, and just a good soldier and he got along good with the enlisted man too, yeah.

MH: In later life, did you run into people who denied the Holocaust happened?

DL: I really hadn't run into too much of that. I see that in the papers once in awhile. But I really haven't—I've had very few conversations in recent years about that with anybody. And when I saw your—there was a note in the 36th Division newsletter, that

you're looking for information. I thought, well, I'll write that man and tell him what little I know.

MH: I really appreciate it. Do you think the train ended up—I know there were camps called Kaufering camps that were part of Landsberg concentration camp. Do you think the train was near there?

DL: I don't know, I really don't know. I think the camps were still there. I don't think the camps had been—any in that area had been, so called—we called it liberated at that time, because that was—the Americans were just moving in, and I would say that my outfit was probably the first Americans in this particular area.

MH: You didn't see those camps, though.

DL: I didn't see those camps. I never really saw a camp. The only ones I saw was Birkenau and Auschwitz in Poland when we were over in Czechoslovakia a few years ago.

MH: My wife and I have also been to Auschwitz and Birkenau.

DL: You what?

MH: My wife and I had gone to Auschwitz and Birkenau.

DL: Oh, man, I tell you, isn't that something? We went over there for a wedding. My daughter married a Czechoslovakian, and we got into their hometown in northern Czechoslovakia, and I looked at my daughter and said, "We're right across the border from Kraków. Let's go over there, and I think that's where Auschwitz was, or near there." And we went over there and took a day's tour of Auschwitz, and Birkenau we toured on the same day.

MH: The problem I had touring that is that when we went there it was a beautiful spring day and the sky was blue and the grass was green and birds were singing, and they had a gift shop and they had a flower shop.

DL: That didn't really make much sense, did it?

MH: And it just—and the GIs that I've talked to that have gone into these camps, the first thing that they talk about is the smell.

DL: Oh, 'course we didn't see that, we didn't have that. The thing that impressed me I think I'll never for get. Two things that I recall most: one was a display, a great big glass case of shoes and purses and things that the kids had to give up when they came in there, and the other was the concrete stock where they put these Jews to punish them when they were working if they talked to someone—a civilian, you know. They put them in there at night in practically freezing weather, standing up, in these iron cages where they couldn't sit or lie down. And I can't think of anything any worse than that, and the fact that the German commandant, according to the briefing they gave us, lived with his family just outside the gates, you know. He had kids, too.

MH: To go back to the train for a moment, did you ever get out of the armored car and try to talk to any of these people?

DL: I did not talk to them myself. I got out of the armored car when I got relieved, but I don't recall talking to them personally, no.

MH: You told me some were in striped uniforms. There's nothing else you remember about seeing the people themselves.

DL: No, I recall some who had on civilian clothes, really ragged and dirty, and it looks like they'd had the same clothes on for months at a time, and I suppose they had, you know. But that's about all I recall. I do recall the faces on them, looking like they certainly had been starved, because they had no fat on any part of their body.

MH: I appreciate your getting in touch with me. You know, it's—finding guys who actually saw it is getting more and more difficult, and I thank you. Do you happen to have a photo of yourself from World War II?

DL: Yeah, I guess I could send you a picture of—I had written a book for my kids and the guys I did service with, and I think I got a copy in there I could send you.

MH: Do you—is it a good photo of you from back then, then?

DL: It's a pretty good picture, yeah.

MH: Okay, and do have a current picture?

DL: Yeah, I do. I got one in the last two or three years, you know.

MH: Okay.

DL: I can get you a current picture.

MH: Okay, I would appreciate that, if you could send it to me. You have my address?

DL: Yes, I do.

MH: Okay, and if you send it to me I'll just copy it on to the computer and I'll return it to you.

DL: Well, that's fine. You can—I was going to say I could send it to you on the computer, but I'm not too current computer for it. I better just mail it to you.

MH: Yeah, if you could mail me a good picture, then I can scan it and send it back.

DL: And when you get this book written that you're talking about it, just send me an e-mail, will ya, and—

MH: Everybody who I've interviewed will end up getting a copy of the book from the publisher.

DL: Well, I'd like to get that.

MH: It's my pleasure.

DL: I'd just be happy to—

MH: No, we'll take care of every—

DL: And if you like, I'll send you a copy of my story of World War II.

MH: If you have it, I'd like—

DL: I mean, it's not a bad book. It's one I wrote and had reproduced in maybe about 100 copies, but I sent it out to all my living buddies and all of my family—even Library of Congress and the 36th Division Museum.

MH: I'd like to receive that, if you can.

DL: I'll send you a copy.

MH: Okay. Thank you very, very much, sir.

DL: You're quite welcome.

MH: I appreciate it.

DL: Bye-bye.

MH: Bye-bye.

DL: Hold on just minute.

MH: Yes, sir.

DL: (to wife) Yes, I do have his address. (to MH) My wife wants to know if I had your address. I have it—you sent it to me.

MH: Okay.

DL: Thanks.

MH: Okay, thank you.

DL: Bye.

MH: Bye-bye.

End of interview