

8-3-2008

John P. Marcinek oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, August 3, 2008

John P. Marcinek (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

Marcinek, John P. (Interviewee) and Hirsh, Michael (Interviewer), "John P. Marcinek oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, August 3, 2008" (2008). *Digital Collection - Holocaust & Genocide Studies Center Oral Histories*. Paper 96.
http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/hgstud_oh/96

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, 2010, 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: C65-00085
Interviewee: John P. Marcinek (JM)
Interviewer: Michael Hirsh (MH)
Interview date: August 3, 2008
Interview location: Conducted by telephone
Transcribed by: Kathy Kirkland
Transcription date: October 19, 2008
Audit Edit by: Mary Beth Isaacson, MLS
Audit Edit date: May 19, 2010
Final Edit by: Dorian L. Thomas
Final Edit date: May 24, 2010

Michael Hirsh: Can you give me your full name and spell it, please?

John P. Marcinek: Yes, it's John, J-o-h-n, P like Paul. Marcinek is M like in Mary—A like in Apple—R like in Robert—C like in Charles—I like in Item—N like Nancy—E like Easy—K like Kilowatt.

MH: And your date of birth.

JM: 2-12-22 [February 12, 1922].

MH: Okay. And you were with the 104th Infantry Division?

JM: Correct.

MH: And eventually got to Nordhausen.

JM: Yes.

MH: Okay. I read the narrative you wrote.

JM: Yup.

MH: I was actually going to try and look up in a book I have what your unit was doing between April 1st through 10th [1945], and if I can find it, I'll let you know.

JM: (laughs) I'm glad you can. I just discovered this morning—and again, I talked about the flood and I had another one this weekend. We live in the desert and we get surprise rainstorms, and sometimes they're flooding-type. And so, over the weekend, that's what we were doing. Again, some of the papers, but I managed to find something in there that indicated that yes, we now have the designation of night fighters. And that confirms what I was indicating to you, about [how] we were the Bulge, because we were overextended and we were vacant at the flanks, so to speak.

MH: Where did you grow up?

JM: In a place called Shamokin, S like in Sam—H like in Harry—A as in Apple—M like in Mary—O like in Over—K like in Kelly—I like in Item—N like Nancy. That's Shamokin, Pennsylvania.

MH: Which is near where?

JM: I beg your pardon?

MH: It's near what city, what big city?

JM: It's just north of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

MH: Oh, okay. And what were you doing before you went in the Army?

JM: I was—my folks were in the beer distributing business; they had the Pabst and Budweiser franchise, and that was within the local locale, the local area.

MH: Do you hear a clicking on the phone, by any chance?

JM: Go ahead.

MH: Are you hearing clicking on the phone?

JM: No.

MH: No? Okay, 'cause—

JM: Because we did have, with the rainstorm, we've had the clicking on the line. We did this morning, but I have nothing in mine now.

MH: Oh, okay. Let me put you on hold for just one second, please. I'll be right back.

(switches phone lines) Hello?

Glenn Lytle: Is this Michael?

MH: Yes.

GL: This is Glenn Lytle with the National Timberwolf Association, 104th Infantry Division.

MH: Hi. Mr. Lytle, can I get your phone number and call you back in a bit?

GL: Sure. I do that quite a bit all the time. (laughs) ...

MH: Okay. I'm actually interviewing one of your alumni on the other line.

GL: Okay, that's fine.

MH: Thank you. Bye-bye.

(switches phone lines) That was strange. That was a man from the National Timberwolf Association named Glenn Lytle.

JM: Oh, yes. He's out of Wichita, I think, now. Originally, he was out of Pennsylvania.

MH: Oh. I have to call him back when we finish. So, you grew up there and you enlisted in the Army, or were drafted?

JM: Drafted.

MH: What year was that?

JM: That was in January of 1943.

MH: Okay. And they sent you where?

JM: We went to Camp Swift in Texas. I think there is still the campground there, but I don't think it's an active area. We were schooled in—the training beyond the basic was field artillery, being trained as forward observers. Forward observers means that you're out there solo, with a radio, and you call back and report fire. I had applied for Officer Training School, and apparently they were doing the same thing with all candidates. They sent us—I was screened at Texas A&M and then sent to Syracuse University, taking engineering courses, because reportedly, they said they weren't—they were disappointed in the caliber of officer material they were getting, and they needed people with engineering backgrounds more than, as they said, underwater basket weaving B.A. courses.

From there, we went to the University of Illinois, where we went through another sorting. We were told that the casualty list coming in from Africa were higher than they anticipated, and now they were drafting fathers. So, they set the screen (inaudible), and I guess I fell in the second category. We were returned to, in some cases, our respective—where we first went in the Army. I was not. I was then sent to the 104th, where we were in training at Camp Parsons.

Prior to that, we had about three or four months of desert training and the so-called nighttime activity, and that was—we filled in the 104th, which was originally, I'm told, the National Guard organization that was out of Adair, Camp Adair in Oregon. So, they were fully staffed with officers; there were sergeants. So, what we were—quite frankly, we filled out the table of organization for the 104th. Most of us were at least 115 or higher in what was the IQ minimums. When the program was shut down—I can't remember the year. A couple of my friends went with the Manhattan Project, which was, as you know, the atom bomb. And the rest of us—I think some went to language courses, and the rest of us were gun fodder.

MH: At what point did you go overseas?

JM: We went in early August, shortly after D-Day, and we were shipped directly from the United States to Cherbourg. We were the first to make a direct landing, but the grounds were already secured. It was prior to the breakthrough at Saint-Lô. So, we were engaged to clean out the northern tip of Normandy, where some Germans were still holding out. And then, I'm under the impression that it was the Port of Antwerp where the 104th Airborne was supposed to make a landing.

MH: The 101st Airborne?

JM: Yeah. They had gotten trapped, and so when the—I guess the strategy or the military. There were some differences, we were told, between [Dwight D.] Eisenhower and the British control. So, the way it worked out, of course, Eisenhower had been selected, and there were some differences of opinion on how the war should be fought. But because the Americans were trapped, and apparently Eisenhower wasn't pleased with what the British were doing in the northern portion, they assigned us to go in to support the Canadians and the British. In fact, for a while, we were on British rations. Now, how many people in the 104th were involved, I am not privy to that, but somebody like this Lytle probably could help you.

So we are—we moved to be in preparation to assist getting the British, so we were attached to, I think, a Canadian artillery group, who were fantastic. They would boom-boom-boom-boom-boom kind of thing. They were accurate with their artillery fire, so they could have the timing explode about thirty feet above the ground to get better effect out of the artillery. I could appreciate that because of the training we had in the American artillery, but I think that the Canadians were equal to us.

MH: So, your first major combat was what?

JM: Going in, we were relieving some Americans who were coming back, as I said in my memo. It was Breda, B-r-e-d-a, Holland.

MH: And—go ahead.

JM: There, we engaged the Germans. The Germans were retreating, but they were breaking the dikes and flooding, so the only area where the military had to do it by foot—and they were setting mines on the tops of these dikes. And there was a lot of chaos, even with our own; we would go out at night. And on November 1—I certainly remember this one. On November 1, 1944, we went out early, and we were on the wrong side of the dike. (laughs) The Germans were looking at our hineys.

MH: Yeah?

JM: And so we took a shellacking there. And I remember that day, I found the nearest church, and I made a promise. “I’ll be in church every year as long as I’m alive.” And I still keep that commitment.

MH: So, that was rough that night?

JM: Oh, it was indeed. Yeah. We were taken, of course, by surprise, and when the dawn came, so much for night fighting.

MH: When you’re on top of the dikes and there’s no—I mean, how much time did you spend in the water that night?

JM: Oh, we had almost—you know, when you spend enough time in water, you wind up with problems of not being able to hold your water, and there were a number of us had that happen. Because you couldn’t—the ground was water-soaked and you couldn’t ride on top. So, we had about seventeen days, as I recall, that we spent in water.

MH: Seventeen days?

JM: Yes.

MH: I mean, were you able to get out at night to sleep, or—

JM: Oh, yes. You'd dig, but they were all shallow trenches because the water table was so high.

MH: Right. Huh. And then when you moved on, and you say "you were the Bulge," what happened there to you?

JM: Oh, then they moved us down in November. Now we were faced with the prospects of going through the Siegfried Line. Our area was Eschweiler, E-s-c-h-w-e-i-l-e-r. When we arrived there, when we were moved from the north down to that area, I can remember Marlene Dietrich. Here we were, just a couple of miles from the Siegfried Line, and she was entertaining the troops.

MH: It was cold.

JM: Yes. We were now in November.

MH: You didn't get to see her legs.

JM: No, I guess they were too costly. A million dollars was a lot of money then. (laughs)

MH: Right. So, what happened to you in the Bulge?

JM: Okay. Well, now, I think you need to appreciate what we'd done in going through, when they talk about friendly fire. One of the things that you're trained is be prepared to retreat at all times; remember how you got to where you were. So, of course, being very conscientious—and it was a dark night but there were overhead wires, the telephone poles; there were landmarks. And apparently, we got up there, and this was all before—this was about a half-mile before the Siegfried Line, which was very well fortified.

The night that we went up—the papers reported it the next day that we made these terrific advances, which was incorrect. We got up and the Germans started mortar fire, and we retreated that night. And that was one of these cases, too, where some of our guys were gung ho with things like grenades hanging on their belts, that type thing. One man

dropped his grenade and of course was not aware of it, but we saw him blown out of his own foxhole on his own. It wasn't nothing heroic; it was just a case of a man being killed for his own carelessness.

MH: Right.

JM: All right. So, then the next day, we made the attempt at night. We knew that they couldn't take tanks there, because the roads and the fields had the mines. Now, men, the weight of a man wouldn't trigger it, but a tank could. So, when our tanks were going to approach—and that was, again, 3rd Armored—they ran into all of these mines. They were no help, with their tracks blown off.

I can remember that one night, we spent a great deal of time checking. If you're familiar with the procedure that we used to have, and I think they still do, you take your bayonet—some of us had long knives—and you could just work a path for yourself, going through this mine field. Well, it turned out—we thought that it was personnel in there. It was a cloudy day, and we—apparently, our higher command decided that if we were going to try to get closer to the Siegfried Line, we should have the line defined. Now, we had these highly fluorescent panels that we carried, and wherever we stopped, the intent was that you would roll that out so that the air support could see them.

Well, as we got up there and came near a hedgerow, suddenly we see some smoke artillery, smoke bombs, going behind us, which now was a clue. It fell short and it fell behind us, so that now we were the enemy, and we were strafed and bombed. The colonel was killed in that one, and several of our men. And, of course, what was interesting—my helmet fell off, and I did try to retrieve it. I went up to where my machine gun was, and I put in tracer fire. I thought the air—the pilots could see that, because that leaves—the reason for the tracer fire, there's a little glow that comes out of the bullets.

MH: Right.

JM: So that you can see your pattern, and you can see if you're supposed to lift your gun higher or depress it, because it left the arc for you to see. Well, we hoped that they would have it. But the men had panicked, and believe it or not, with all the concerns that we had about personnel and land mines, or personnel, that turned out—I don't think anybody was hurt, other than the strafing, so-called friendly fire.

The next day, of course, we just bed down, and that was a pretty active day when we were—at one point, we knew that they were being fed, somehow we got the information.

So, they said, “Zero your guns on the path leading up to the bunkers.” And I can remember—I think I went through one complete can of ammunition shooting at them.

MH: What are you shooting?

JM: This was a—this is old time now, remember. We’re talking about water-cooled .30 caliber machine guns. And that meant you had to carry water and you had to carry the ammunition.

So, I’m vague on how it was that we got through; maybe they just bombed the hell out of us. I don’t know how we got through, but we did. And now it gets something like Thanksgiving. One of our guys smokes a cigarette, and a sniper gets him at night: went right to me. [He] died, by the way—he survived that, but he lived here in northern California, and I read that he died about a year ago. But he was one of those [about whom] you were told, “Don’t pull any dumb stunt like that.” And, obviously, he revealed our position. However, the Germans were equally panicked. And they were just—I remember the one prisoner we took said, “*Der Krieg ist die Scheiße*,” in other words, “The war is the shits.” One of our guys went in and took them at night, startling them; I think he took about five prisoners.

And where we were, on Thanksgiving night, because we were getting special food, was in a cemetery where all the tombstones—there was a lot of mortar fire, and a lot of graves were re-opened. That was called Weisweiler. I don’t know how that’s spelled. Ten years later, I happened—no, it was 1953, fifty-four [1954]. I happened to be—yeah, so it was ten years later. I did go back through all of that same area, and it was interesting. The tombstones and everything else, nothing had been repaired; it was still almost as if the war just ended last week. My new wife was in a state of panic because we were going there and she felt that we were still the enemy, and that was not true.

One thing, Michael: as we got in there and we met the Germans, you had a lot of respect for them as fighters and as people. And they were pretty well disciplined. As we got near the end of the war, we were wondering if we were fighting the wrong enemy.

MH: You mean—

JM: I’m sure that you’ve read those stories.

MH: You mean you would have rather been fighting the Russians.

JM: Yes.

MH: But you're talking about fighting the Wehrmacht, not the SS.

JM: That's correct. The SS were the ones that were forcing. They were the so-called elite, but they were apparently forcing—they were treating their Wehrmacht as gun fodder. Pretty much as some of the guys—some of our fellows were pretty bitter about being treated as infantrymen when they were bringing some of the black people up, who were troublemakers, and so then they would come in and they'd have to get closer to the front. Before that, they all had the rear supply duties to perform.

MH: So, let's take us up to where you were getting close to Nordhausen. What was happening?

JM: Oh, okay. Well, that's right when—now we get into Cologne. And as I had pointed out—I didn't mention it there—we were wearing pretty heavy clothing. You had two sets of underwear, two sets of clothing and an overcoat, and a raincoat over that. We were not exactly fashion plates. But that was going across the Cologne plain. Now we were held down by what we thought—and, I think, later proved to be true—at the top of this coal bank they had forward observers, and their mortar fire and artillery fire was quite accurate. So, we were to try to take that hill.

At this point, I became separated, because there was this railroad track and the Germans had set up an automatic—almost a robotic set-up, where they could shoot down that railroad track and get anything that tried to cross over the tracks and the ditch that was there. And I think I was just a little too cocky, thinking that I could go jump with the cans of ammunition hanging on my belt and carrying a tripod. So, when I tried to leap across that area, because you could see where the bullets were landing, I apparently fainted. When I came to, I didn't have the ammunition and I didn't have my tripod. The GIs in my outfit apparently thought that I was dead, and so they just left me; and when I came to, I still had my pistol. And I knew that it was the hill they were going to—and now I'm in a state of panic, because I think that I've got to catch up with these people.

So, that night I climbed—and now, keep in mind, we had air support and they were doing a lot of bombing in advance of where we were coming, so there were a lot of fires. So, as I'm crawling up, I see a silhouette of two men, and it turned out, of course, that they were German; it was by accident that I stumbled on this outpost. They were silhouetted by the fire in the background and I hear them speaking in German, so I shot both of them with

the .45 at a reasonably clear—you know, it wasn't that difficult to shoot. And that was the end of it. I don't remember how I caught up with my outfit; but my knee, I damaged it severely. And so I was more anxious, and this is something that happens. You need to get back with your own outfit, that kind of thing.

So, that was going across the Cologne plain. Now we're in Cologne, and that was hard fought getting, because they held the high ground and we were in view of their forward service. Now we get to Cologne, and of course we're up to (inaudible), where I said that we were now concerned, as the military leaders had been, because that was the purpose of Antwerp. They wanted to shorten the lines of supplies; they knew that getting across the Rhine [River] was going to be another D-Day. But you can see that the Germans had anticipated that, also, and so we had retreated out of that part, I'm told. Now we're in Cologne and we're splitting out—how are we going to get across the Rhine? And they were bringing up the DUKWs. Those were those amphibian trucks where they could—you could drive them; you've probably seen them.

MH: I've seen them. They used them for tourist vehicles.

JM: Yeah, that's right. Okay, so they—in fact, later in my own personal career, I was with Kaiser Aluminum and we were making [and] supplying aluminum for the newer version of those DUKWs, because this was before containers, and I'll get into that kind of thing perhaps someday in the future. Because while I was with Kaiser, I was then in charge of the transportation applications for aluminum, so the Air Force, the coal cars, railroad cars, that kind of thing, that was my responsibility.

Now, getting back to this, they were bringing up that type of vehicle, and they were trying to think “How are we”—again, you can pick up this kind of scuttlebutt from other men, so I'm not trying to portray myself as being important. Everything that you're getting from me is, again, an ordinary soldier and picking up the scuttlebutt as you get it. And sometimes you even disregard it, because it's just kind of silly. Well, now we're sweating this out, and the word comes down—they couldn't believe it—the bridge was left unguarded. And it almost seemed like it was a set-up, but our captains and major said, “Let's go and see what this is all about.” And we went over without any problems. Of course, then, by that time—

MH: When you went over the bridge, did you walk or did you ride?

JM: No, we rode on Jeeps. Yeah, and got across. Some of our own fellows had to later, because the Germans were now attempting to bomb that with their planes. But some of our people came over on, where they took those DUKWs and lined 'em up parallel to

each other and laid tracks over the top of that and came across the temporary bridges. But we were there first, so they said, “Go as far as you can. Don’t worry about supplies; again, live off of the land,” and that’s what I describe there.

Yes, we were in the Rhine country, and yes, we drank wine and got into some homes and got into their—and believe it or not, we were treated quite well, even though I can remember one woman was most unhappy. She came out with a broom after one of our guys, because he was stealing eggs out of the chicken pen. (laughs) And his expression, “*Doktor sprechen ich muss haben Eier*: the doctor says I must have eggs.” (both laugh) Incidentally, he’s now dead, too.

So we went and we didn’t know where we were going, but we were following the (inaudible). The armor came somewhat later, because I don’t think they made it across the bridge. I don’t know who followed. But I think if you were to be able to get that book that sells for about \$8, *The 415th Regiment*, that would contain the history and give credibility to what I’m remembering or not.

MH: Right.

JM: And that’s the 414th. I found that this morning, and you can get it through Lytle.

MH: Okay.

JM: So, now we get to Paderborn. And now all these sheets are hanging out the window
—

MH: This is the city of P-a-d-e-r-b-o-r-n?

JM: Correct.

MH: Okay, go ahead.

JM: And that’s one that you’ll want to check, because there were some comments made. This major was taking the credit for having encircled more men, more prisoners, than recorded in military history. And I don’t know if that’s true, but supposedly we were told that *Newsweek* carried that story. And when we were there, at that time frame between

April 1—the reason I happen to remember that is that a classmate, that was her birthday. That person has since died.

So, I remember getting in there, and this 88 artillery piece, we were staring right at that; why they didn't kill a bunch of us, I don't know. In fact, I think they only fired one or two rounds out of that, and they were probably just as scared as us. So, the war is now fluid. Communications for everybody is—you know, you'd like to know more; you just followed your so-called leaders. So, yes, we did. I can remember we raided a warehouse, and it was apparently a distributing point for the Rhine wines. Everybody got a couple of bottles, and I don't remember anybody getting drunk on them.

But then, that's where the 3rd Armored came in, and I'm hoping that you're going to be able to get somebody in the 3rd Armored that might remember this incident. Because as we're going—we left the machine guns behind—we were told, "You're not going to be fighting that kind of war anymore, but you need to go now; you're supposed to meet up with the Russians." There was a theory that if we could get to Berlin, or get to Berlin before the Russians, it would be a different world. Well, of course, as you know, the Russians got there. And we would run into people who were now—in this part of Germany, they were running away from the Russians.

MH: Right.

JM: They would rather come toward the Americans. And that was causing problems for us.

MH: In what way?

JM: Oh, because they were coming—we were headed east, and they were escaping the Russians and they were going west.

MH: And the roads were clogged.

JM: And the roads were blocked, that kind of thing.

MH: I mean, are you looking at hundreds and hundreds of people on the roads, or thousands, or are you looking at stragglers here and there?

JM: No, I would say that it was hundreds. It wasn't—they have may have had it elsewhere on the front, but [in] our section that we went through, I would that say it was light. But I would read stories about it: they were holding up the war, and they were holding up their own efforts. So, I hope that you're able to get something from that 414th Regiment article that'll say exactly what happened.

MH: Okay.

JM: And there's some great maps, too, that I learned about after. (laughs) Even though you say, "Oh, I was there," but you don't even remember events. These were names.

And then the story, as I relayed, was that the call comes down over the tank that we were riding, and they said, "Any of you guys up there speak Slovak?" And I said yeah, I had eight years of formal Slovak. But then, I also lived in—it wasn't a ghetto, but I lived in the communities where we were already first generation, you know, from the parents who came over as immigrants. So, you learned just like the people do with the Spanish, you know. So I said, "I'll do it; can I help?" They had a jeep there, and they took me up to the major who was in command of that movement.

He was very impatient; he didn't like the idea that he had to stop, because some of the men said, "Here, you've got—these are escapees, I'm sure," because they were somewhat ragged, but they had the stripes on—broad stripes; they weren't like we have, the jailbird kind of thing. And with the charades and a little bit of the accent, couldn't understand, but enough that—they wanted to surrender. Well, what they had also said that their guards were missing: the SS troops were gone, and there were new people that came in. And so, with that, as we walked down the road—the major, he just wanted to take off in the worst way. He said, "You guys will figure out how you're gonna catch up to us," but I don't think we were running into any enemy fire, "but we're supposed to go as far as we can."

So, he got four guys and the one man—I think it might have been Frank Marcus, and I'm not certain of that; maybe that 414th booklet will help you with that. But as we're going down the road towards this encampment, we see, again, the sheets like they were in Paderborn. Now, I'm sure these people were getting communication, while we, as soldiers, didn't. One town we went into—you could pick up the phone; the phone system was still working, that kind of thing.

MH: And the sheets, you said, were hanging—these were in the town buildings or these were in the camp?

JM: No, in the camp.

MH: And what were they—

JM: In the city of Paderborn, that's where the people were willing to surrender.

MH: Okay.

JM: But as we get to the encampment, there, too, they also had the white sheets hanging out of the windows and over the fence.

MH: What's the encampment look like?

JM: I'd have to say that I'm influenced by some of the pictures that we've seen, that they're pretty much like the GIs had. If you were in California, I could mention a couple of the places. They just looked like these were temporary buildings. I guess they weren't, for them.

MH: But was it surrounded by a—

JM: By barbed wire.

MH: Barbed wire, okay.

JM: Yeah. They were double sets of wire.

MH: Okay. And this wasn't the big prison at Nordhausen, because there was a prison with a brick wall. But there was—

JM: I think you're right. The part that I can only report on is the part—because, as I said in my notes to you there, we didn't even realize that this was Nordhausen, was the area that was responsible for the buzz bombs.

MH: Right. So, you're looking at a camp that's surrounded by double barbed wire.

JM: Correct.

MH: Do you go through—

JM: And people hanging on the wires, because—when I say hanging on the wires, facing out toward us. And then I hear—as I say, I took that to mean surrender, but we still wanted to be cautious. I hear this woman scream out in Polish, “They’re going to shoot at you!” and I hit the dirt—even if that wasn’t what she thought she said. Obviously, whatever she was yelling was done in a screaming manner. And then, that stopped.

MH: Did they shoot?

JM: Yeah, they didn’t—you know, they were shooting and it was erratic. And it wasn’t—I don’t even think the bullets came close to us.

MH: Where was the shooting coming from?

JM: Oh, it was coming from kind of a tunnel. It was—I can’t say it was subterranean, but it was—wherever this tunnel was, it had windows, or open spaces. I can’t recall if they were closed with windows, I don’t think they would have been; more likely they were just openings for these men. Because, as I said to you in the memo, the guys that I met in San Francisco, they were the ones who confirmed: they said, “Yeah, that was a tunnel that went out of the main building and this is where it was an escape route,” that they thought these renegade soldiers used. Now, he thought they were SS troops, but the commandant that I spoke with later—

So, as you can see, there’s nothing heroic in here, other than the fact that—the irony that the buzz bomb, the Bulge, when we were taking—again, because of our background, especially mine, I wanted to be a forward observer for the artillery. So, I was pretty good at gauging distances, and also pretty good with the survey instruments. We said, “We’re all down; can’t we”—we could see the vapor trails going down, you know, the trail left behind the buzz bomb. So, we said, “Why can’t we all just triangulate on this?” If you take a given point where you know people are, and each one gives his azimuth off a permanent point, then you can triangulate then where they meet. In fact, that’s pretty

much what we do in my current business. You get better accuracy sometimes with a line of sight than you can just by complete instrumentation.

So, I don't know how big this camp was; we were not aware of what we were even dealing with. And that's why I never made much to do about it. But I have the commandant's gun.

MH: How many inmates do you think you saw behind the barbed wire?

JM: Oh, I can't—I can remember there was a lot of clamoring. There had to be maybe about 200.

MH: And what condition were these people in?

JM: Oh, they were emaciated; they were very hungry, and they were begging for food. They were just as have been portrayed in the movies.

MH: So, you're four guys in a jeep.

JM: Yes.

MH: How do you deal with this?

JM: No, we didn't. We were on foot.

MH: You were on foot? Okay.

JM: Yes. We walked that distance of a mile or so.

MH: And the gate was open when you got there?

JM: Oh, yeah. There was no problem, because that commandant was most—he was just a young fellow. Because he could speak English, or reasonably so, he made it known that

he was in the seminary, that he had just gotten that appointment to take over when the SS left. So, apparently, SS people were in charge of the slave labor camp, and now they brought up the Wehrmacht, the people's army.

MH: This guy was—the lieutenant that you saw was—

JM: I don't know. I don't know what rank he held.

MH: But he was Wehrmacht, or SS?

JM: He was Wehrmacht. Yeah. He was not SS troop.

MH: So, what's your conversation with him like?

JM: Oh, it's quite friendly, that's what I say. He apologized, you know, when—the prisoners, they wanted food. And I said, "Commandant, where is the commandant?" and they pointed the way and I went in there, and of course they were waiting outside. They knew that we were Americans, and they were a combination of clamoring for food and there were—they treated you as though you were a hero. And we weren't anything; we were just a couple of scouts.

MH: Yeah. When you say—

JM: They were coming up from behind.

MH: When you say they were treating you like you're a hero, what were they doing?

JM: Oh, all they're doing is—some of them were saying, "Thank you, Americans"—again, what you might expect from them. They weren't doing a thing. They couldn't be very—they were more concerned about getting some food. They weren't clapping hands or anything like that. It was a rather somber-type thing.

MH: How do you feel as you're seeing all this?

JM: Well, I don't think that—at this point, we were not—I shouldn't say that we were. You're not hardened, but you get the feeling that you're kind of a changed person. You're dealing with realism, and I don't think that—there's not a lot of emotion; at least, there wasn't in my case. It was business.

MH: Has any of this stuff resonated later on in years?

JM: No. You mean, like, did I have a—my mother said that when I came home, I was rather reclusive. I think the only reason I was reclusive [was] I was discharged early. One of the things that I did have a lot of—there was one fellow who was in our (inaudible). He used to be a baseball player, in civilian life. But he did a lot of reading, and we always teased him, but there was a certain amount of envy, because he could report. He could almost repeat Shelley. You know, he was a high-class guy. I think he came from moderate means, but he loved to read. And I guess I picked up a lot of that from just associating with people like him.

It's amazing how—I think one drops all appearances of—you have to take over at times. The sergeant isn't around, but you know that you should be doing something. So, to a degree, each man was working as his own army. You had to rely on other people, because we were doing a lot of this at night, moving at night. There wasn't a great deal of fear, but I guess the—the moment that I would say that I was concerned more than anything else when this (inaudible) was to come through the line. So, that went on for about a week.

MH: That was somebody who was supposedly a spy out there, working for us in the German area?

JM: Yeah. And we were concerned about, "Damn it, this man is this important." Yet the guns—we did do that. A number of the men put their safety on their guns, and it saved my hide one night because I couldn't get back in on the safe side of the house. They were guarded out front, and I needed to go to the bathroom badly. So, I went outside the building and now came around from the front, and that wasn't very smart. But, because the man had his carbine on safety—he had panicked and he should have shot me, but he didn't. That might be—there are other funny incidents that occurred, too. I can remember trying to write a letter, and I'd scratch it. One of our Southern guys said, "Marcinek, your pen is scratching too loud."

MH: That was the era before—

JM: (inaudible) with survival, because of the cold. The Germans had stored a lot of—they compressed their coal into bricks. You would heat up the concrete, pieces of concrete or bricks, in the stove where the enemy couldn't see it, and then you'd take those up and put them between your legs with the blanket over when you were doing so-called watch duty, taking your turn in securing, because the Battle of the Bulge was going on behind us, or to the south of us. We didn't realize.

Although, in my particular case, when the Battle of the Bulge started, I happened to be in Liège, Belgium, and this was the first break we had because we'd been shot up pretty badly. So, we were told, "Don't advance. You guys go back, get your personal things taken care of, and then you'll have one or two nights and then you'll go back." Well, we hadn't even gotten in for a change of clothing when the word came down that there were paratroopers. There was a lot of snow on the ground. "Be aware that they are—we have learned that they're turning signs around." And they were.

So, there was confusion. And I guess if there was a night to be scared, that was it, when we were going back from Liège, going back to the so-called front. Because we didn't know who was enemy—these guys were dressed in officers' clothing and in GI clothing, so you couldn't be sure who you were talking to. Those were those early days of the confusion.

MH: Right. What was your rank at this point in the war?

JM: Just a private.

MH: Private, okay.

JM: Yeah, I didn't make corporal until the last week in the Army. (laughs)

MH: So, where were you when the war ended?

JM: Oh, I was in a place called Halle, H-a-l-l-e, and this was where, I'm learning after the war is over, that the Count, [Felix] von Luckner, is the one who asked the Americans, "Don't destroy the city." And there was concern, of course, about Dresden, and the damage that was done there. So they still, I get the feeling, celebrate the fact that the Americans requested—they respected his request to limit the damage; the war is over.

MH: Right. When did you come back to the States?

JM: We come back about thirty days before the end of the Japanese war, because we were en route back to the United States. We left from a place called Camp Lucky Strike. That was an interesting meeting I had with my brother, who was a captain in the Transportation Corps. I saw this plane landing, this small plane landing, and I get a call from one of the offices. They say, "Your brother wants to speak with you." And I thought, "Well, he's in London; what's he doing here?" And what he was doing was negotiating getting a jeep, one of our jeeps; he wanted to borrow one of our jeeps to go to Paris, and wanted to take his kid brother. So, we did. He didn't have any money, but I had some souvenir money that had been still recognized. It wasn't the issue. But remember I said I went to Belgium, to Liège?

MH: Right.

JM: Okay. There were people lined up at the banks, and I asked, "What's that all about?" And they said, "The Belgians are changing their money and there's a limit of \$3,000, so they have to go back in line again." I had a lot of German souvenir money that was still being honored, so I took some of my souvenir money, got in line, and had it redeemed. Now I have this Belgian money, and I'm just carrying it along as souvenir money. But I knew it was better than the other souvenir money.

MH: Right.

JM: Because I was able to get the equivalent of about \$3,000. So, I happened to have that to fund my brother's meeting. Now, that money was going to poop out on the Monday. This was the weekend that we were going to be in—and, fortunately, with his connections with the man who was handling the finances, they were able to give us—we were one day early, being late, and had enough money to be able to celebrate in Paris with my brother.

MH: Nice.

JM: I guess that's the other light part of it.

MH: So, when did you get out of the Army?

JM: I got out in December. We didn't have enough so-called points, but they were anxious to get rid of people, as much as they could. So, they took a number of us, who they thought have enough skill, to discharge thirty-year men who were coming in from Alaska. So for those—that's how I got the corporal ranking. I handled the discharge of thirty-year men and had seventeen women working for me. That was maybe about three or four weeks. I'm not sure how their paperwork went, because I didn't know anything about it, but that's the Army.

MH: And then you went home—

JM: Yeah.

MH: To—

JM: Went back to Pennsylvania.

MH: Pennsylvania, okay. And you were married?

JM: Got married in 1953, after I got my other college out of the way. I graduated in 1950 from Bucknell University, which is, again, just north of Harrisburg.

MH: And children?

JM: No children.

MH: No children, okay.

JM: Remember, I told you about being—a number of us came down with it where we could not control our water.

MH: Right.

JM: The doctor said, "You'll outgrow it; I don't think you'll have any permanent damage." But when we got into where we were in the warm and apparently totally

relaxed, you know, you'd wind up embarrassed because you wet yourself. That happened to a number of us. Maybe that's why I didn't have any children. I don't know.

MH: Okay. And your career was as what?

JM: My career what?

MH: Your civilian career.

JM: Oh, the civilian career. After college, I was going to go into the family business. But this Bucknell was a small school, and it's one where the wealthy kids—you know, it was a family kind of tradition thing. Well now, here were a number of GIs, and I happened to be president of the Society for the Advancement of Management. We said to the dean of the school, "You know, you've got a bunch of older GIs; you're not teaching some of the courses, not offering some of the courses that can get these men jobs." He said, "You get me the men and I'll get you the courses." Because with the dean—Dean Coleman brought them in from Penn State if he had a class of thirty guys.

So, we went out the summer before. The school didn't have a placement bureau. Because I was active in the fraternities, I got a number of fraternities to say, "Look, can you put up—if we can get recruiters coming in from IBM," which was the big one at that time, "GE, Armstrong Cork, and DuPont, Rohm and Hass? You're not recruiting. What is it the school has to offer?" So, we had a number, went back to the dean and said, "Here's some of the courses. You'll going to have to get industrial management. You'll have a good engineering school, but the industry needs a lot of the GIs, and we're all more mature." So, the school cooperated, and we set up a school placement bureau and got the different fraternities to introduce—it was that simple: introduce the candidate to the company representative.

3M Company happened to be in, and I was president of the fraternity and I had hosted them that night. And they said, "What are you going to do?" I said, "I'll probably go into the family business." Well, they made an offer: \$50 more than anybody else was getting a month. So, I joined 3M. If you've seen the red stop signs, a couple of generations ago, they were black and white, they were not reflective. 3M Company had come up with the reflectorization. And, as a result of repatriation charges, that kind of thing, the United States had negotiated a number of the patents that were held exclusively by the Germans that were now made available to all businesses, and that book had to be maybe four or five inches thick. This was part of the repatriation process. And that's another story in itself.

MH: What did that have to do with the reflective stop signs?

JM: Because there was a method that they had for making these microscopic-sized beads, and that was Czechoslovakian. What they did was they had what they called a shot tower. In this tall tower, they would take molten glass and essentially spit it out; in dropping to the earth, it would form these microscopic-sized beads. Now, as a youngster, you've taken the magnifying glass, and you knew that if you got it intense, you could burn paper. Have you ever done that?

MH: Yes.

JM: Okay. That's the same thing. What you're doing there was establishing the focal length of that piece of glass. Well, if you take your imagination a little fast forward—now, vaporization—you could deposit. By having a vapor, you could get a mirror-type effect on Mylar. And Mylar is a patent that's a derivative of something that the Germans had.

I think someone will write someday about what were the economic conditions that caused these people to want to start wars? And why is it that the Japanese felt they had to go to war with us? Now history is telling us that we had frozen them in; they couldn't expand. The Germans, they needed the resources, and they—now, they did the Blitzkrieg, which is “lightning war.” They overcame everybody. You have the United States, for one; we didn't want to get involved in any of that.

So, it's pretty much the same attitude. Now, you're talking to someone who is eighty-six years old, but this is a hard thing to convey to someone who's gone two generations separated. We've had wars, and of course, maybe we just need to talk to more people. As they said when we were fighting the Germans, aren't we fighting the wrong war? But again, it wasn't everybody felt that way.

MH: Well, I thank you very much for taking your time to talk to me. I really appreciate it.

JM: I hope that it does some good. And I hope that you can get somebody else. I'm sure that people are dying right and left that should be able to shed more light on it. I've lost contact. I haven't been to the last two reunions.

MH: Do you have a photo of yourself from World War II?

JM: I don't think so.

MH: No? Okay. All right, I thank you very much. Take care, sir.

JM: You bet. Bye.

MH: Bye-bye.

End of interview