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Elton Oltjenbruns oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, December 29, 2008

Elton Oltjenbruns (Interviewee)

Michael Hirsh (Interviewer)

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Concentration Camp Liberators Oral History Project
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Interviewer: Michael Hirsh (MH)
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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: Could you please—just so I have it on tape, could you please give me your name and spell it for me, please?

Elton Oltjenbruns: The name is Elton, E-l-t-o-n, Oltjenbruns, O-l-t-j-e-n-b-r-u-n-s.

MH: And you're at ... and your phone is....

EO: That's right.

MH: What's your date of birth, sir?

EO: August 23, 1920.

MH: August 23, 1920. You were with the 2nd Battalion, 405th Infantry Regiment, 102nd Infantry Division.

EO: Yes.

MH: When did you go into the service?

EO: I was inducted the twenty-fifth of October, 1942.

MH: Where'd they send you?

EO: I was inducted at Denver, and I went to Camp Maxey, Texas, near Paris, and it was where the 102nd Infantry Division was activated.

MH: And before I forget, what were you doing before you went in the service?

EO: I was a farm boy.

MH: How long did it take before they sent you overseas?

EO: We shipped overseas about the twelfth of September 1944.

MH: Right after the invasion. And you went to where, Marseille?

EO: We unloaded off a troop ship at Cherbourg—

MH: Cherbourg, okay.

EO: That was before Antwerp was liberated.

MH: And then what happens?

EO: Well, we waited there for a while, and they took our trucks to form the Red Ball Express. That was the name of the trucking company to help furnish supplies, ammunition, and whatnot over General (laughs)—

MH: [George] Patton?

EO: Patton, yeah. He was way up north already. And that was before Antwerp was liberated; and later on, they were liberating Antwerp about that time, and that made the supply lines a lot shorter. We were assigned to the 9th Army, and that was up north. The British 2nd Army was up along the North Sea, and there was the British 2nd Army and the American 9th Army. Then there was the American 1st Army; that was where the Bulge went through.

MH: Where'd you see your first combat?

EO: It was in an area on the north end of the Siegfried Line, there was a little bit north of Aachen, Germany. Well, we liberated one town in Holland, and then we started in on Germany. That was our baptism into fire, as I recall it.

MH: I've interviewed, at this point, about 160 men who liberated a bunch of different camps, and I've never asked this question: What was the feeling like when you finally crossed into Germany?

EO: We had a job to do. And we went—we were under the 12th Armored group, I'm not sure if it was the 12th Armored Group or what. General [Bernard] Montgomery was in charge of that part of the time.¹ They gave Eisenhower a fifth star so he could have a little authority over Montgomery.

MH: At this point, what did you know, if anything, about concentration camps or slave labor camps?

EO: I didn't know anything about it.

MH: The Army never said a word to you?

EO: Not that I remember.

MH: So, did you run into any of them before Gardelegen?

¹ While Bernard Montgomery was a British commander, he led the northern section of General Omar Bradley's 1st Army.

EO: No, we didn't. We came to one place, I don't remember what it was, but I remember going into—it was just a small place. They had kind of a bunk bed with a little mattress, and there wasn't any food there, but I don't remember where it was, but it was a little camp on the way up toward—we headed northeast, past Düsseldorf, and we crossed the Rhine at Wesel, and headed up toward Berlin, and we met the Russians at the Elbe River.

MH: Gardelegen was just before the Elbe.

EO: Yes.

MH: Tell me the Gardelegen story. What's your first sight of it or smell of it, or what happened?

EO: I don't remember, but I know it happened the day before we got there, and they started to bury the victims already at that time. You ever see pictures of it?

MH: Yes, I've seen lots of pictures.

EO: Well, I was there the second day, 2nd Battalion Aid Station. We supported—gave medical support for the 2nd Battalion.

MH: Your MOS [Military Occupational Specialty] was a medic?

EO: Yes.

MH: So, you come across this place. What's your first sight of it?

EO: It was terrible. The smell, the burning flesh. I was there, and there was a trench there with bodies in, and some bodies were still in the big barn. I went back there in 1979 with a group of infantrymen from the 102nd Division, and they had removed the sign there that had been put up by the 102nd Infantry by the cemetery, but that memory should be kept alive forever. But that sign was taken down. I understand it was put back after the [Berlin] Wall came down.

MH: How do you react? You're walking through there, how do you react to it?

EO: I don't remember. It's been sixty-some years ago.

MH: Yes, it has.

EO: I was sure glad to come home. I'd had all the death that I could handle, and I was destined to come back and go to—after the war was over, I had appendicitis after D-Day over there, I had appendicitis when I was at Gardelegen, and they flew me in an old DC-3 or C-47 to a hospital in Belgium, and I got in with the low-point men that were going to the Pacific. The second A-bomb was dropped while I was on the high seas on a freighter. We docked in Boston about the fifteenth of August or something like that. The headlines of the Boston newspaper read that Japan wanted to surrender then.

MH: And you knew you weren't gonna go.

EO: Well, I didn't know anything about it, but anyway, I never went. That was great.

MH: How long do you think you spent at Gardelegen?

EO: We were there in that area for—we were at Stendal, a little place east of there, for a month or so. I don't remember.

MH: Were you there when they had the civilians come in to bury everybody?

EO: Yes.

MH: What was that like?

EO: That was different. That's all I know. The way I can explain it.

MH: What do you mean, "different"? One man told me that the ones who were reluctant got hurried along with a bayonet on a rifle.

EO: They probably were; I don't remember that part of it. I was a corporal at that time.

MH: And you were a medic, you said.

EO: Yes.

MH: Were guys coming to you for help in dealing with what they were seeing and being forced to deal with?

EO: Not really, no. We just—our battalion surgeon, he was a doctor, and he was in charge of the battalion aid station. I worked with him whenever there was casualties to evacuate. I was involved with that.

MH: Where did they set up the aid station when you were dealing with the Gardelegen massacre?

EO: Well, there was a collecting point back farther, and then from that collecting point, they were evacuated to a field hospital. That's where I had surgery, at a field hospital there.

MH: How did seeing that affect the way you felt about the German people?

EO: I felt sorry for the kids. They'd stand by our garbage pail where we left the chow line to empty our mess kits. They were waiting like they'd sure like to have some food.

MH: The German kids.

EO: Yes.

MH: Did you feed them?

EO: Well, if we had any scraps left. I'm an old farm boy. I had an appetite, I never had any scraps; I ate all I could get.

MH: What about the adults? Were you dealing with people who said, "We didn't know, we weren't involved, *Nicht Nazi*"?

EO: I don't remember anything about that.

MH: Anything else that comes to mind?

EO: Not that I remember. I always remember the story about Churchill when he and Eisenhower went across the Channel; did you hear about that story?

MH: No.

EO: When Churchill—they got over into Germany, and he unzipped the trousers of his pants to what he called "anoint the hostile land."

MH: I'd heard something like that with Patton.

EO: That's the way it was. We had a saying around the company to urinate in the Rhine. That was the goal of everybody.

MH: And did you fulfill the goal personally?

EO: As I remember, I'm sure I did.

MH: Well, that's good. Do you happen to have a photo of yourself from World War II?

EO: I believe I do somewhere.

MH: What I'd like to get is a picture of you from World War II and a relatively recent photo. If you have it, I can send you a photo envelope and you can mail it to me, and I'll scan it in to the computer and send it back to you.

EO: Sure, I can send one to you.

MH: Okay, I'll send you an envelope. And it's H-o-l-y-o-k-e?

EO: Yes.

MH: Nothing else that comes to mind, particularly about Gardelegen?

EO: Not really. I remember when we met the Russians at the Elbe.

MH: What was that like?

EO: There was 145,000 [soldiers who] surrender to the 102nd Infantry Division. There were weapons, rifles and whatnot, lined up there about four feet high for about a half a block long.

MH: That's a large stack of rifles.

EO: It was, yes. I remember that very clearly.

MH: They didn't want to have anything to do with the Russians.

EO: No, I guess they were told the Russians didn't take prisoners. They're probably right. I wasn't there, and I really don't know. But I can understand and I'm probably sure that was the way it was.

MH: Do you know anybody else who with the 102nd who was at Gardelegen?

EO: I'm thinking. Most of the guys I was with aren't there anymore. Hey, you might send to Bob Enkelmann from St. Louis, Missouri.² He'd give you a story, I'm sure.

MH: Enkelmann?

EO: Yes.

MH: You don't have a phone number, do you?

EO: Just a minute. I can find it. I got it right here, hold on.

MH: Okay.

(long pause)

EO: Hi, you still there?

MH: Yes.

EO: Bob Enkelmann, Robert, and his wife's name is Irene. His phone number is....

MH: And how do you spell his last name?

EO: E-n-k-l-e-m-a-n-n [*sic*]. He was with 2nd Battalion.

MH: Okay. What'd you do when you came home from the war?

EO: I went back to the farm after about a year or so, year and a half or two years. I got married and raised four daughters on the farm and moved to Holyoke when I got to be sixty-five, and I'm still here.

² Robert Enkelmann was also interviewed as a part of the Concentration Camp Liberators OHP, DOI C65-00038.

MH: At what point did you tell your wife and your kids about what you had seen?

EO: I don't remember when it was.

MH: Okay. All right. Well, I thank you very much. I'll send you an envelope, and if you can send me the pictures, as I said, I'll scan them and I'll send them right back to you.

EO: Okay, thanks a lot.

MH: Okay, take care. Happy New Year to you.

EO: Same to you.

MH: Okay, bye-bye.

End of interview