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John Olson oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, July 18, 2008

John R. Olson (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: Just so I have it on tape, give me your full name, please?

John Olson: John R. Olson.

MH: And you were in Company D of the 415th Regiment of the 104th Infantry Division.

JO: Yes.

MH: Tell me a little bit about where you grew up before you went into the service.

JO: Where I grew up?

MH: Yes.

JO: I grew up in Duluth, Minnesota.

MH: I forgot to ask you your date of birth.

JO: Date of birth was February 18, 1926.

MH: What were you doing just before you went into the Army?

JO: Oh, I worked an optical shop in Duluth.

MH: And you volunteered or you were drafted?

JO: I was drafted.

MH: Where'd they send you?

JO: I took my basic in Camp Fannin, Texas.

MH: About what month and year was that?

JO: Well, it would've been—oh, let's see, I think I went in October of forty-five [1945]. I think.

MH: No.

JO: No, wait, forty-four [1944].

MH: You went in in October of 1944?

JO: Yeah, I think so. It was a long time ago.

MH: I know, we'll figure that out in a minute. So, you went through basic in Texas, then what happens?

JO: Well, then we went out to Fort Meade, Maryland, where we were re-outfitted to go overseas, and I think it was late February or early March that we sailed—went on the ship to Europe.

MH: You were with the 104th at that time?

JO: No, I was not. I was just a replacement.

MH: Where'd the ship take you?

JO: Went to Le Havre.

MH: Then what happens?

JO: Well, from Le Havre, we went by 40 and 8 boxcar train to Verviers, Belgium, I believe it was. This was just going through the mill as replacements.

MH: What's it like riding in the 40 by 8s?

JO: (laughs) It's not 40 by 8, it's 40 and 8.

MH: 40 and 8.

JO: Forty men and eight horses.

MH: I thought it was forty men or eight horses.

JO: I don't know if it's "and" or "or." I hope it's "or" for the sake of the guys who travel that way. You just can imagine riding in a boxcar, that's all. Inconvenient, uncomfortable, but better than walking, I suppose.

MH: This is in the wintertime?

JO: Pardon?

MH: In the winter?

JO: No. Well, this would've been late winter, early spring. I'm not exactly sure of the dates on that.

MH: How long were you in the boxcars?

JO: Well, I suppose it took them three days. It wasn't very long. Roughly three days to go into Belgium.

MH: Had you been on a troop train in the U.S.?

JO: Had I what?

MH: Had you been on a troop train in the U.S.?

JO: Not before that.

MH: Going from Texas—

JO: Yeah, I suppose we went by troop train. I was inducted into the Army at Fort Snelling, Minnesota, and we traveled by some kind of a troop train down to Texas, and boy, I don't remember a whole lot about it.

MH: However bad it was, it was more comfortable than the boxcars.

JO: Yeah, yeah, almost anything is more comfortable than a 40 and 8.

MH: You get to Belgium, and then what happens?

JO: We were in Belgium just a couple days. We were issued our rifles in Belgium. We didn't have rifles before that. But we were issued rifles and ammunition. And we spent a day on the range, if I remember right. Then I think we went by truck into Germany, and we camped one night on the Rhine River—well, it would be near Aachen, and it's there that we were assigned to our unit, so that from that point on, we were with the 104th.

MH: Did you consider getting an assignment to the 104th good or bad, or didn't you know the difference between the units?

JO: I didn't know the difference. They were all the same to me.

MH: And you were about how old at that time?

JO: I had just turned nineteen.

MH: Suddenly, war is real.

JO: Oh, yeah.

MH: Tell me about your first combat experience.

JO: Oh, that was an exciting evening. I don't know where we were, I don't know the name of the town or anything, but there were four or five of us that were trucked up to join the unit. We were in a small German town when we came in in a truck, and then we unloaded and were told where we were assigned, to Company D in the machine gun squads, and went into the house. The company commander was there, I remember that, and the first sergeant, and they were just eating supper. That's one thing about the kitchen: even in combat, they tried to always have at least one hot meal a day. It wasn't always possible, but they were very good at it. And we hadn't eaten—I don't even know if we had lunch that day, so we were hungry. Anyway, as we went into the house, there was a German mortar barrage going on. I've thought about it many times, and I figure the Germans must've had a forward observer in town or very near the town to focus in on us. So, they were dropping those mortar shells very close. We were in a house on the very edge of town. And every few minutes, a mortar shell would explode somewhere around. I don't remember them hitting the house.

MH: Did you get the sense that they were walking them in on you?

JO: No, they were just being nasty. We were in the—as we joined the outfit, I know I ate some supper. I didn't have much appetite, but my squad was busy digging a machine gun emplacement, foxhole-like, on the very edge of town and facing toward wherever the German defenders were. And while we were digging this foxhole—machine gun emplacement, it has a C-shaped hole with the guns sitting in the middle, and they were doing a real nice job of it, digging, and piling the dirt up around. And then the object was to place boards or something over the top of it eventually. We didn't get that far. But every few minutes, we'd have to—there was a barn right next to where we were digging this. So the older guys, they recognize when the mortar shell was dropped into the tube, so that when they heard that, we'd run into the barn and kind of crawl into the hay until those mortar shells quit, and then we went back out and kept digging the hole.

MH: What made the older guys think that hay would keep the mortars—

JO: I'll say something now. I'm a little hard of hearing.

MH: I was asking what made them think hay would stop shrapnel.

JO: I don't know. I never even thought of it. I just put my head down. I was just trying to hide, that's all. One shell did hit the barn, but it didn't in any way—no shrapnel fell around us. A mortar shell will explode on the slightest impact with anything.

MH: I was under mortar fire in Vietnam, so I know a little about what you're talking about. How'd they treat the new guys? I know the new guys in Vietnam weren't treated very well by the old guys.

JO: We were treated very well. We were immediately one of the group, and I never knew anything but real friendship and respect.

MH: That's terrific. So, you're still digging this emplacement, and the Germans are still mortaring you. Now what happens?

JO: They told us to—we got a telephone message or whatever kind of telephones they had, and they said to bring the gun into the house. So, after digging that real nice hole and all, we never used it. And we picked up the gun and our tools and stuff and ran into

the house. We went up to the second floor of the house, and we were in a bedroom, and there we set the gun up in a window, and we hung blackout, you know, blankets and stuff over the windows so we could have a light inside. And the gun was facing the same direction, and mortar rounds were still coming in a little bit.

Right across the street from us was an anti-tank outfit, and they had—I think it was a 75mm anti-tank gun, so they were there. I don't know who else was around, but the mortars kept coming in, and they were coming pretty close. They knew where we were. One round hit the house we were in, and I remember our Jeep driver, our squad Jeep was parked in the street on the side of the house, and that round hit the chimney or near the chimney. Anyway, it knocked the chimney bricks down and our Jeep driver was pretty mad, because the bricks fell on the Jeep and smashed his windshield. I don't know how it was in Vietnam, but we never had our windshield up; we also had it folded down flat on top of the hood. So, he was unhappy because they broke his windshield—not that he ever used it.

So, we were then in this room, and we had one little candle in the room. There was a bed in there, so we were taking turns being on watch. I guess, my being new to the group, they let me be on watch first.

MH: How many guys were in the room?

JO: Oh, there must've been four of us, anyway. I was told all their names, but I didn't remember any of the names. Then the telephone that we had rang us or the voice came in, we were the outpost, calling OP—and that's something I never learned in basic was how to use a field telephone, so I didn't know what—I tried to answer it, but I never got through. I tried to explain I was a new guy there, and I didn't know what to do. And I don't know if nobody could hear me or what. Anyway, the candle sputtered out, so it was pitch black in there.

Then I heard heavy boots running up the stairs. I hoped it was my own squad members, and it was. But they came running up and said, "Grab your stuff. We're pulling out." I don't know why we suddenly pulled out. Oh, there was another thing, too. Off in the distance, the direction we were firing—we never did fire. But we could hear a German self-propelled gun, like I suppose they had them in Vietnam, too, like a tank. Anyway, we could hear it out there, and I think maybe that had fired a few rounds—I think they knew that anti-tank gun was there, but they didn't hit it to my knowledge. But things were moving real fast then. We were told we were pulling out, so grab your stuff.

Behind the house, toward the center of town, a very little town, was an orchard. I think it was an apple orchard; I'm not sure. So, we picked up our gear, and I was an ammo bearer then in the squad, and I grabbed—of course, I had my M1, and I did not—I don't think I carried my pack. I think they told me when we first arrived, "Just put your pack on the Jeep trailer, and if you need it, we can get at it." I never carried a pack overseas. Anyway, we started running. I was just following the crowd then. We're running through this orchard, and every, oh, probably every minute or less, a mortar shell would explode somewhere nearby. I don't remember ever hearing them come in or anything, but I know I did duck down. It was a rainy, cold night. In fact, it snowed later on that evening, and I was scared, sure. And I'm just trying to keep up with the rest of the guys and running with what I had, and hit the dirt every once in awhile. And I remember my helmet fell off one time.

MH: You're carrying metal ammo boxes?

JO: Yes, yeah.

MH: And your own rifle?

JO: Yeah. Made a handful. We got over—we ran, oh, I would guess 100 yards and came to another house and a barn, there's a big barn, the kind of a barn that had a drive-through in the middle, and it had places for livestock on either side. But right in the middle in this open area was a great big General Sherman tank, completely filled the opening. I could barely squeeze by, but that's where the other guys ran, so that's where I ran. By this time, I had no idea where I was or where I was supposed to be, and I didn't know the names of anybody else in the squad. All I knew, I was in Company D and in a machine gun squad. So, I was lost. I didn't know anybody around me. There were several guys milling around, waiting for, I suppose, waiting for transportation. Like I said, it was raining and miserable. And finally—

MH: Did you have a poncho to keep the water off or not?

JO: I had a raincoat, but I didn't have it on. I had one with me, but I wasn't wearing it. I still have my field jacket that I was wearing at that time, though. Okay, I'll try to shorten

MH: No, you don't have to shorten anything. I'm curious, when did you first get a Timberwolf patch, shoulder patch?

JO: Oh, boy, it must've been pretty soon. I don't remember exactly. I think it was within a week that we were issued a patch and told to sew it on. Anyway, I found the company headquarters. I think I asked somebody. I didn't know where to go; I didn't know who to ask about. I ended up at company headquarters—or it may have been battalion headquarters, for all I know; somebody's headquarters, anyway—and explained my dilemma, that I was a new man, I didn't know where I was supposed to be, I didn't know who my fellow soldiers were, I didn't know any names. But they found out, they did a little telephoning, and found out where I was supposed to be. And somebody came and got me and led me, and we loaded up on some 6 by 6 trucks and left. And I don't know where we were going, and I don't know where we went.

MH: You were a private then?

JO: That was my first night in combat.

MH: Right, you were a private?

JO: Yes.

MH: The sun comes up the next morning, and what happens?

JO: I assume that it did, and I don't know where I was at. (MH laughs) I haven't any idea.

MH: You assume it did, but since the sergeant didn't tell you it did, it didn't count.

JO: I just stayed with the guys I knew. I was beginning to get a few names and recognize a few people. Mostly, that night before, I didn't see them in the daylight. It was just dark, so I never got to identify them that way, but I did get to identify them. I knew who to stay with. I don't know where we went. We went by truck someplace. I don't have any idea where we went.

MH: When was the next combat?

JO: Oh, it must've been probably two or three days later. Our outfit was supposedly known to make attacks from the rear. We would walk around a town and come in the

back door. So, we did a lot of nighttime walking. We'd take off just about dark and we would walk sometimes all night. And then we'd come into a town through the back, you know, the back door. I know at least one town we went through, we walked right by the house that the German defenders were in. They weren't any serious threat, really. They were mostly older men and young kids, led by one SS trooper. But that's the way we would come in.

We might have a little firefight if the defenders wanted to fight; you know, we gave it to them. And we would go in, we'd set our gun up wherever the squad leader said to put it and hoped it was in a good position. We were often—we'd go into a house where the civilians were down in hiding, down in the basement of the house, and that was all right with us, just as long as we had a window to stick our gun out of. And then we'd have a short firefight, maybe last an hour, maybe a little more. I never experienced—I never knew of any American soldier being killed or wounded at the time that I was with them. We never suffered any casualties.

MH: Do you remember the first time you actually fired at the Germans, you personally?

JO: Yeah. Well, it wasn't long, probably a couple of weeks, that I got boosted up to second gunner. Second gunner was the guy who carries the gun. At that time, I was—I had already been issued a carbine, M1 carbine, because I was carrying those ammo cans, and then when they upped me to second gunner, so I was carrying a gun, then they gave me a .45 to carry.

MH: So, you went from an M1 rifle to a carbine to a .45.

JO: Yeah. Interesting thing, I never fired my M1 rifle except when it was issued to me in Belgium and we went on the range. I never fired the carbine. I remember shortly after I got it, I found out it didn't even work right. The clip would not push the ammunition up. I tore the whole thing apart, the gun and the clip and everything, oiled everything up, cleaned it all up and got it in good shape, but I never fired it. Then I got issued the .45. I never fired the .45 in combat, and I never fired it until I got out to California. Just never had any occasion to.

MH: What machine gun were you carrying?

JO: That was a .30 caliber water-cooled jacket on it.

MH: Which means what, which means you have to carry a container with—

JO: No, it didn't have any fluid container or anything. I was told that they just filled the jacket with antifreeze, because it was in the winter, but we never had one of those tanks and the hose that goes with it. I never had it; and in fact, even the flash hider broke off one day, so I didn't even have a flash hider on it. Let's see—I tell you, the only time I fired a gun in combat was the last fight we were in, Bitterfeld, Germany.

MH: What's the name of the town?

JO: Bitterfeld.

MH: Bitterfeld, okay.

JO: It's near the Mulde River, I think. But it's a coal mining area. In the province of Saxony, if I remember right.

MH: Is this all mountainous area you're going through?

JO: No, it wasn't mountainous. Quite flat country. We did go through—when I first got in the outfit, we walked through the Hartz Mountains, and that was very mountainous, very beautiful country. Not big mountains, big hills, really. But in Bitterfeld, we were on the third floor of an apartment building, and the gunner was firing. We had the gun set up on a tripod on a kitchen table, and it was my job as second gunner to make sure I steady the gun and it doesn't kick itself off the table or something.

Anyway, we were just kind of looking around. Some riflemen were with us, and one of the riflemen said he was looking out the window, I guess 150 yards off, there was a bridge going over a railroad track, and he said he thought he saw some German soldiers going under that bridge. And it looked like they were carrying Panzerfausts; that's the German bazooka. Yeah, and he had an M1, and I said, "Shoot down there where you think you saw—" "No, no, I don't want to shoot." I said, "Give me the gun," and so I took the gun, and he told me about where to fire, so I emptied a clipload of ammo down that way. I never did see anybody; it was just brush and grass, so I don't know if there was anybody there or not. That's the only time I fired a gun in combat. So, it's not a very exciting adventure. Oh, it was exciting, but—

MH: War usually is exciting or very boring. Tell me, at that point—excuse me, I have a bad cough; hang on one second. (coughs)

JO: Pardon?

MH: I just said I have a bad cough.

JO: Oh, yeah.

MH: At that point, did you know anything about the concentration camps or the death camps?

JO: No, no more than what I saw at Nordhausen or that one camp that I mentioned. That was prior to this last experience.

MH: Let's go back to your approach to Nordhausen.

JO: I don't know anything about the approach; all I remember is going into the town. And why we were riding on the Jeep trailer, I don't know, but we were (inaudible). But I remember it was a dark kind of rainy day. We were just in a long column of trucks, tanks, and Jeeps. I don't know if we were near the beginning of it. I think probably we were near the beginning of the line, because we just came into town and I was sitting on the trailer facing to the left. And as we went along the street, I looked down this other side street, and I saw this ten-foot-high wire fence and a big gate, and the gate was open, and I saw these two prisoners in their striped suits standing by the gate, standing at the gate opening there; it was a big gate for trucks to get through. They had these beautiful smiles on their faces, because they knew now they were being set free. We never went into the camp ourselves; that was other units. I read letters by other guys who went in or were part of the detail that went in there to actually liberate the people and take care of the prisoners. But I never even talked to any of our guys who did go into the camp, the prison camp.

But I just saw these two there, and I hope I never forget what they looked like. They just beamed, although they were just like human skeletons, so thin. And they had these striped suits on. I had no idea what kind of a camp it was. I'd heard about concentration camps, but I really didn't know much about them. I don't think Americans knew much about them at all.

MH: That's what I'm hearing.

JO: I doubt that we have any appreciation for what all was going on. Go ahead.

MH: How close were you to those two men?

JO: How what?

MH: How close were you to those two men?

JO: Within a block, or maybe even less than that. Maybe half a block, I don't know.

MH: You had to be pretty close if you could see the smiles.

JO: Yeah. Well, we were close enough I could see that, yeah. Maybe it was a half a block. I may have said a block, but it was, you know, close enough. I don't know if we waved at them or not, but just saw them, you know, and I don't know where we were heading. I don't know where we went after that. The only thing I remember about Nordhausen, the city, was seeing those two guys at that gate to that prison camp. Years later, I read about what it was, what the prison camp was, that it was a place where they built parts of something for the V-2 rocket, the German rocket or they did something. And there was thousands of prisoners held there. I don't even know if half of them survived. I understand that our men, our division, went in and released them, those who could walk or could get out: they took them out, and they forced all the civilians along that road to leave their houses, and they put the prisoners, housed the prisoners in those houses and got food and a comfortable place to stay for awhile. But this was behind, you know, behind us.

MH: When you saw those two guys, did you say anything to the other troops you were riding with on that Jeep trailer?

JO: I don't remember. I think they saw them, also. I don't remember saying anything to anybody. I think I was a little bit struck or shocked, you know, and almost sort of speechless. I suppose we may have talked about it later, but I don't remember.

MH: Do you remember writing home about that?

JO: I probably did. If I did, they may have censored it. I know it was still a few weeks away from the end of the war.

MH: That was the only camp you saw?

JO: Pardon me?

MH: That was the only camp you saw?

JO: Yes, it is, yeah.

MH: It's now sixty-three years later, and you still see those images.

JO: Oh, I could look at them like I was looking at them right now. I can see those two guys standing there, very impressive. And I'm not exactly sure what all my emotions were at the time, but I just—I could almost feel the—I don't know if it was joy they were feeling or just relief of getting out, you know, being set free from that camp or what, but I could almost feel it as I looked at them. I would've loved to have been able to go over and talk to them, but I couldn't do that.

MH: When was the first time after you came back to the United States that you talked about this experience?

JO: Oh, boy, I don't know. I imagine I told my parents about it. I don't—I really don't know. I've mentioned it from time to time. I haven't talked about it as much as I could have.

MH: Did you marry and have children?

JO: I did. It was several years later, though.

MH: Did you ever tell your wife or your kids about it?

JO: Oh, yeah. Yeah, I did.

MH: What was that like?

JO: I don't know if it impressed them or not. I'm sure my wife was impressed with it, or tried to imagine what, but it was something only—you had to see it to really catch the feeling of it all, the emotion of it, the sense—it made me feel good later. Not right away, but later, it made me feel good to be a GI. I count it a privilege to have served in the Army.

MH: I find it difficult to imagine what those of you who fought in World War II went through, some for years or months. But it's an experience that I don't know anybody can really understand unless you've been in it.

JO: It's like me, I can't even comprehend what you guys went through in Vietnam. I've talked with others, you know guys who were there and all that. I'm glad I was in Europe.

MH: My reaction is just the opposite. We didn't face enemy artillery, we didn't face enemy tanks, we didn't face enemy aircraft.

JO: The only enemy aircraft that harassed us was—we used to call him “Bed Check Charlie.”

MH: I've heard about him.

JO: You can hear—he'd come over in the dark of night, you'd hear this single-engine light airplane. I never saw it, of course, but he'd come chugging through the sky, looking for any kind of lights or—and that's why we were very strict on blackouts. And he'd come over like an old Model T or something, running through the sky.

MH: I know you remember the faces of the two guys at the gate, but can you say whether that one experience that maybe lasted a couple minutes, if that long, affected your life?

JO: I think so. I think I've realized a little better how fortunate I and we are to be in America. And again, I say, as I look back, I count it a privilege to have served in the Army and Europe, and to have been a part of that. And to think that I was a part of releasing those guys from that prison, that makes me feel good about it. I don't boast about it. I'm just glad I was a part of it.

MH: Anything else you want to tell me?

JO: Just that I count all of it by the grace of God that he took me through it, protected me. I was never injured. It was all a positive experience, even though it didn't seem so at the time.

MH: I think a lot of men who've been through combat feel that way. Mr. Olson, I thank you very much for your time. I sure appreciate it.

JO: I hope sometime I can read what you're writing.

MH: I have your address, and you'll get a copy of the book. Do you have a photo of yourself from World War II?

JO: I have. I don't know how good it is. I did eventually pick up a camera someplace, so I tried to take some pictures, but I was usually taking them, not of me. I don't know if anybody else has any. I've got one and I don't know how good it will be for reproduction. I could try it.

MH: What about a picture of yourself as you are today?

JO: Well, that's not too much to look at. Oh, yeah, I got a lot of pictures.

MH: Could you pick one out, and if I send you my address via email, could you send me a copy and I'll scan it and—

JO: I can't do it by email.

MH: No, what I'll do is if you can mail it to me, I'll scan it and send it back to you.

JO: Oh, I see. Okay, yeah. I have obviously send the (inaudible). We have an old computer that I rescued from a junk pile and my son-in law helped get it workable, but it's pretty limited in its capacities.

MH: Okay

JO: But I could try to do that. I have—I must have your address.

MH: I'll email you my address.

JO: Okay.

MH: Okay, and if you could send me a pretty good picture of yourself, I'll copy it and send it back.

JO: Oh, yeah. Okay.

MH: Okay?

JO: I'll try to do that.

MH: Thank you very much, sir. I sure do appreciate that.

JO: It's a pleasure to talk to you.

MH: Okay

JO: And I wish you well in what you are doing, working on.

MH: Thank you, I appreciate that. Bye-bye.

JO: Thanks for your part in Vietnam.

MH: You're quite welcome, sir.

End of interview