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Domenick J. Pecchia oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, September 5, 2008

Domenick J. Pecchia (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: And would you give me your name and spell it for me, please?

Domenick Pecchia: The name is Domenick Pecchia, D-o-m-e-n-i-c-k. You want a middle initial?

MH: Sure.

DP: J is the middle initial, and the last name is Pecchia, P-e-c-c-h-i-a.

MH: And what's your address?

DP: ...

MH: And your phone number is....

DP: That's correct.

MH: What's your date of birth?

DP: 7-2-26 [July 2, 1926].

MH: And you were with H Company, 255th.

DP: That's correct.

MH: Regiment, 63rd Infantry Division.

DP: Right.

MH: And you got to—what was it, Dunsberg? One of the Dachau subcamps?

DP: No, it was Landsberg. Right.

MH: Can you just—where were you before you went in the Army?

DP: High school.

MH: Oh, okay.

DP: Yeah.

MH: Were you drafted or you enlisted right away?

DP: I was drafted.

MH: And when did you go in the Army?

DP: If I'm correct, it was the eighteenth of October, 1944.

MH: In forty-four [1944]? And when did you go overseas?

DP: The exact date I don't remember, to be honest.

MH: You went over in, what, in January of forty-five [1945]? With the 63rd?

DP: No, I didn't go with the 63rd. I was a replacement.

MH: So, when did you join up with the 63rd?

DP: (laughs) I can't—I don't remember.

MH: I'll stop naggin' you about dates. Where did you join up?

DP: Near Waldenburg, Germany. Yeah.

MH: And did you get into combat right away?

DP: Yes. Yeah.

MH: Do you remember the battles?

DP: That particular battle, we took Waldenburg that evening, that day and the evening. There was a castle up on the hill there, and that's what we took. And then we just kept moving forward from there.

MH: You were what, eighteen or nineteen years old?

DP: I was eighteen plus at that point.

MH: How does an eighteen year old kid deal with that sort of stuff?

DP: Well, my reaction was not having—you know, the training was great, but you never know how you're going to be in combat. I wanted to react properly, that was my intention. And evidently I did, you know, didn't have any problems. Scared, to say the least, particularly the Sunday when I got my baptism of fire.

MH: Tell me about that.

DP: Well, like I say, we were going toward Waldenburg, and we jumped off. They start sending more smoke out in the field over there, and about eight o'clock we start moving out.

MH: In the morning?

DP: Yeah, in the morning, and as I recall—shortly, I don't think we had gone fifty or sixty yards when the first gunner got hit and somebody else picked up. You know, I was carrying ammunition, and one carries the tripod and the other one carries the .30 caliber, water-cooled .30 caliber. Yeah. And we just moved around. You know, what can you say about combat?

MH: Incoming artillery?

DP: Yeah, we had incoming artillery, and mortars coming in.

MH: That's always fun.

DP: Yeah, 'cause you don't hear 'em too well, unless—

MH: Unless they're right on you.

DP: Right on top of you. And then the artillery was—what the hell do they call that?

MH: Screaming Mimis?

DP: No, no, we got that later on, but—

MH: 88s?

DP: No, this was a very sensitive nosecone, and it would burst—you know, if it hit a leaf up at twenty or thirty feet it would go off, so you'd have a bigger spread instead of going into the ground and exploding. What do they call that? I can't even remember. Tree fire—

MH: Tree-bursts. Or aerial bursts.

DP: Right. Aerial bursts, yeah. And kept going during—you know, moving up, moving up, and then we finally moved into the castle. This castle was on fire, and we moved in late at night; it was dark at the time we moved in. And then you continue on from that. What can I tell you? Yeah.

MH: Were you hit at all in any of this?

DP: No, no, I was lucky.

MH: Throughout the war?

DP: Yeah, I was long enough in combat to get the Combat Infantry Badge, yeah. But I was, fortunately, I never—was never wounded.

MH: What did you know, or when did you know, about the concentration camps?

DP: Well, we were moving. Wherever the hell Landsberg was, we were moving in. And I came up, you know, with the squad. I came up and I was at the front gate. The gates were open and these prisoners were coming out—you know, in the striped uniforms and so on.

MH: You're in a jeep?

DP: No. No, I was on foot. Yeah, and they were coming out, and we kind of hesitated for a moment, but then you know, the squad leader said, “Get your butt going.” So, we went on. And so I saw several—you know, kind of a horde of prisoners coming out; but we didn’t stay very long because we had to continually move forward. So, that’s about what I saw. I did see, as I said, the open gates and the prisoners coming out.

MH: Did you have a chance to try and talk to any of them?

DP: Uh, no. We were moving too fast at that time.

MH: What did you think when you saw them?

DP: I was horrified. I felt—their condition is what stuck in my mind more than anything else.

MH: If you can remember the scene, can you describe it for me?

DP: Well, you know, they were all gaunt, you know. They were kind of stooped over, and you had the feeling that they were not as old as they looked, you know what I mean. And, as I say, it was a short stay at that particular thing, but I can remember vividly seeing—you know, they had the little old hats without a brim and the black and white—the striped uniforms. But they looked very gaunt.

MH: Did any of them try and come up to you?

DP: No, no. They were moving. We were going, like, to the left, past the gates over there, and they were streaming out and going to the right. Where they were going, I’m sure somebody else was going to start picking them up and seeing if they need immediate attention, I would imagine. But we went right on.

MH: When you finally had a chance to stop that day, did you talk about it with your buddies?

DP: No, because—everybody made a comment, you know. It wasn’t—you’re always worried about being under fire and so on, so you don’t get much chance to chit-chat. You know. You gotta keep your wits about you all the time.

MH: By that time in the war, from what I understand in talking with other guys, there wasn't a whole lot of fighting going on.

DP: Yeah, this was toward the end there.

MH: They said this was like April 29th or 30th.

DP: Yeah, something like that.

MH: So the war's got a week to go.

DP: Yeah.

MH: Did—how long did you stay over there after the war ended?

DP: It was over a year. Yeah, it was over a year that I was there after. Most was after the war.

MH: And when you finally went home and got out of the army, where'd you go to?

DP: University of Illinois.

MH: In Champaign?

DP: Yes.

MH: And what'd you major in there?

DP: Physical education.

MH: And so what'd you do for most of your life?

DP: I was in education for forty years with the Chicago Board of Education. I was in physical education in the gym, and then I became assistant principal at a high school.

MH: Which high school?

DP: Wendell Phillips High School.

MH: Okay. I went to Roosevelt.

DP: Oh, did you?

MH: Yep.

DP: Sam Edelcup!

MH: Sam Edelcup, 5'2" inches tall, maybe. And I'll never forget him lecturing us as freshmen—I was only 5'1" tall—and he looked right at me when he said, "I don't want some of you people to even bother me." I will never forget—

DP: You had to see him at Crane. Prior to going in, prior to going to the service, I was playing baseball. He was at Crane Technical High School at that time. And he had a pitcher's name—

Pause in recording

MH: Let me get back to the subject at hand. In the course of time, once you were back home, do you remember talking to anybody about what you saw that day?

DP: Not too much, because you lose track of the guys. I didn't even know the 63rd had an organization. I found out years later. So, we never—I never had a chance to talk to people in general, anybody like in my neighborhood where I grew up. People I knew, they were—none of them were in the 63rd Infantry, so we had nothing in common to talk about.

MH: Did you—do you have kids?

DP: I have one son.

MH: Did you ever tell him about what you had seen?

DP: No. He—you know, you see enough of that on TV. He never asked me about it, and I never said too much. 'Cause, you know, it was a quick—and when I think about it right now, I can still—I can see that particular picture there in my mind. It will stick with me the rest of my life. But talking about it when we get together, I was a member of the American Legion Post from the old neighborhood. You never talked about it. You talked about everything but. Yeah.

MH: Anything else that comes to mind about that?

DP: No. I can't think of anything. If you have any questions later on, you can call me back any time you wish.

MH: Thank you very, very much, and thanks for reminding me about Sam Edelcup.

DP: (laughs)

MH: Take care, sir.

DP: All right, thank you.

MH: Bye-bye

DP: Bye-bye now.

End of interview