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Joe Vanacore oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, November 30, 2008

Joe Vanacore (Interviewee)

Michael Hirsh (Interviewer)

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Concentration Camp Liberators Oral History Project
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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: You go by Joe or Joseph?

Joe Vanacore: Either one.

MH: Okay, and it's V-a-n-a-c-o-r-e?

JV: That's correct.

MH: What's your birth date?

JV: My what?

MH: Your date of birth.

JV: October 31, 1919.

(TV playing in the background)

MH: I wonder if you could turn down the T.V.

JV: Yeah, I'm going to. I'm looking for the thing now.

MH: Thank you.

JV: What's the matter with it now?

MH: It's okay.

JV: Okay.

MH: Okay. You were in the 4th Armored Division. Which battalion?

JV: A Company, 8th Tank Battalion.

MH: A Company, 8th Tank Battalion. So, you were in Albin Irzyk's battalion.¹

JV: That's correct. My tank had the bulldozer blade on it. I was the only one in the battalion.

MH: And were you the driver?

JV: I was the driver.

MH: So, tell me about coming to Ohrdruf. What happened?

JV: Well, you know, from—if you're driving a tank and you're in a fight in enemy territory, you're buttoned up and all you can see is out the periscope. And you can't see where you are or what—you know, all you concentrate on is what the tank commander

¹ Albin Irzyk was also interviewed for the Concentration Camp Liberators Oral History Project. The DOI for his interview is C65-00062.

tells you to or what you see in front of you. If we're in a fight, I have to use my own judgment on which way to turn the tank and move it, but I never kept it still and gave an enemy a target. And the thing is, we don't—buttoned up in the tank, you don't see a hell of a lot; half of the towns I went through I didn't even know what their names were. But anyway, Ohrdruf had these high—ten foot high, I guess—wooden gates, very heavy wooden gates, and I pushed them in with the bulldozer blade.

MH: Were any other GIs there ahead of you?

JV: No. I pushed the gates down, and my company was the only company there. We were far away from all the rest of the battalions.

MH: Okay. Do you happen to know, was there more than one set of gates going into Ohrdruf?

JV: Not that I remember. All I remember is the main gates, one coming off the road there.

MH: Okay. Did you know a man named Bruce Fenchel?

JV: No, I don't think so. What was he in?

MH: Um, hang on one second. Well, I know he's in the 4th Armored, but he might have been in the other combat command.

JV: Yeah. Well, see, there was three combat commands and 35th Tank [Battalion] was in one, the 37th [Tank Battalion] was in another one, and 8th Tank Battalion was another one. One was always in reserve and two of them were on the march.

MH: Okay. So, you push down these gates—

JV: Pushed them open, yeah.

MH: And you push them open.

JV: The enemies, the Germans that were there, as soon as we got that close they took off.

MH: Was there any shooting?

JV: No, no, no shooting getting in there; they were running. We caught up to them a day or two later. I can't remember perfectly when exactly it was, but I know we caught up with them.

MH: Okay. They were down the road someplace?

JV: Yeah, they were high-tailing it back towards—you know, they're in Germany.

MH: Right.

JV: I guess they didn't know where to go.

MH: Okay.

JV: You're running away from the enemy, you're in your own country, what the hell do you do?

MH: Right. What were the names of the guys in your tank, do you remember?

JV: Bill Jenkins was tank commander, Bill Fowler was the gunner, I was the driver. The loader and the radio man—at the time we were there, I can't remember which one it was; we kept changing that all the time, getting different guys. And Doc something from Texas; he was the assistant driver, the bow gunner.

MH: When—just out of curiosity, when you talk about a bow gunner, where is he sitting?

JV: There's two men in the driving compartment, the driver and the assistant driver, and he manages the bow gun. There's a .30 caliber machine gun that's in his hands. They stick outside the tank; I call it the passenger side.

MH: Okay. And if he has to get back in and button up, the gun stays up, right?

JV: The gun stays there all the time.

MH: Okay.

JV: Unless you take it out. We took it out once at Avranches, took it out and mounted it on the ground.

MH: So, what happened once you get inside the gates?

JV: Well, we were shocked at what we saw. One of the first things I saw was this big pile of bodies, about five, six foot high, like a haystack. I didn't realize they were bodies till—you know, the mind didn't tell me they were bodies until I got a little bit closer and then I saw them, you know?

MH: Were you out of the tank at that point?

JV: No. I got out of the tank to go look at the ovens where they did the cremating, and we looked around. And of course we had to move right quick, and [George S.] Patton and [Dwight D.] Eisenhower got there and then we took off, we had to take off. My company had to—we were ordered to keep going. Other companies, you know, medics come in, the doctors—they called every doctor in the division in.

MH: Okay.

JV: And they brought lot of important people—as a matter of fact, we had the mayor—you know, if you're writing a story about Ohrdruf, you gotta write the story also of the main town. Our objective wasn't Ohrdruf prison camp; we didn't know it was there. Our town was—what was the name of the town now? Do you know the name?

MH: Well, you came through Gotha.

JV: No, there's a town, the town where all of the great German masters of music lived;

they all lived there, and they had beautiful homes. They were untouched. And the mayor, we had the mayor and his wife and his whole family: they made them march through the German—through the prison camp, and they didn't believe what they saw. They committed suicide the next day, the husband—the mayor and his wife.

MH: Right, that was the mayor and the wife of Ohrdruf.

JV: Yeah, Ohrdruf. Yeah, Ohrdruf, that's the name of the prison camp. I'm trying to think of the name of the town.

MH: Well, the town of Ohrdruf was right next to the prison camp.

JV: No, wait a minute, there was another name for the town where the people lived; they lived about a mile away from the camp. It was a beautiful town, untouched by the war. They were all very famous—[Johann Sebastian] Bach, [Sergei] Rachmaninoff, guys like that. They owned houses there. Did you know that?

MH: Uh, no, but I'll figure it out.

JV: Check it out. As soon as it comes to me—I'm losing my memory anyway, you know, and I never forgot the name of the town; it's in the book, in the history book. I think our objective was the town, 'cause we took the town and then we went over to get the prison camp on our way out of there.

MH: Yeah, I'm looking online and it says Bach lived in Ohrdruf.

JV: Bach?

MH: Yeah.

JV: Yeah. The town of Ohrdruf?

MH: Hohenkirchen.

JV: No, that's the name of a town.

MH: That's the name of a town—

JV: The name I'm thinking about is a very short name.

MH: Um—

JV: Oh, God, what the heck was the name of that damn town? Ohrdruf, Ohrdruf, I'm trying—

MH: Eisenach? Uh—

JV: No, they were close by.

MH: Well, I can find it.

JV: Yeah, I'll—I gotta look it up in one of my books or something.

MH: Okay. So, how long did you stay in the camp?

JV: My crew, my tank—well, my company, rather, we were there maybe three, four hours and then we—I figured they did some bulldozing with the tank in there, filling up holes and stuff like that, and then we got orders to move. Our battalion commander Irzyk and—I don't know if it was Eisenhower. Patton was there.

MH: But they didn't come for a few days.

JV: Yeah, that's when they were called in and told about the camp, and then they all came to look.

MH: Right. But you were gone by then.

JV: Yeah. And Eisenhower made the remark that he was ashamed to be called—like, he was ashamed to be of German descent, something like that. I don't know the exact words, but that's what he was talking about.

MH: Right.

JV: After what he saw there. They had a dump truck, a train-yard dump truck loaded with what I thought was sand: it was the ashes from the bodies that they burned. And they'd go and they'd dump it in this river someplace down there. I didn't know where it was that they did it.

MH: So, what about the survivors that you saw?

JV: Now, there was one American pilot who was still alive, and the doctors went to work on him right away. Our medics and all the medics were available, for the battalion right away went to try to find out as many that they could that were still alive, and they found quite a few and they started treating them, taking care of them, you know?

MH: What are you doing while that's going on?

JV: Oh, just looking around in disbelief at what I saw. The smell got me so bad I couldn't eat for a week. Terrible smell, of the dying bodies and all, the cremation and all that stuff.

MH: How did that sort of thing affect you later on?

JV: Well, it stays in my mind, and you know, when I hear people say, "The Holocaust was a fake," I would choke them. I really couldn't stand people that say things like that. We were right there, we saw with our own eyes. We did at two camps, Buchenwald and Ohrdruf.

MH: Yes. So, tell me about Buchenwald.

JV: I wasn't at Buchenwald.

MH: Let me put you on hold for one second—

JV: Yeah, sure.

MH: Don't go away.

(switches phone lines) Hello?

Unknown Woman: Hi, it's me.

MH: Hi, I'm on the phone. What?

Unknown Woman: The tire thing went on when I was driving.

MH: So, stop at Goodyear and get some air.

Unknown Woman: Am I in Punta Gorda today?

MH: Okay, good-bye! I'm on the other phone.

(switches phone lines) Hi, I'm sorry.

JV: Yeah, I don't know which company or which battalion took Buchenwald. The only thing I know about it is what we read about it, what we heard. The 4th Armored took Buchenwald and Ohrdruf, and we—my company took Ohrdruf, not the battalion; the battalion came in later. We were out front, way out in front of the battalion when we got to Buchenwald—I mean, to Ohrdruf.

MH: And what was your company again?

JV: A Company.

MH: A Company.

JV: 8th Tank Battalion.

MH: Okay. Where'd you grow up?

JV: Jamaica, New York. Queens.

MH: Queens? Okay. And how old were you when you went in the service?

JV: Twenty-one.

MH: You were drafted or enlisted?

JV: Drafted. I enlisted in 1937 when I was seventeen and the Army was filled; they didn't have any—they weren't recruiting because they were filled. And then when things got a little tougher, about the year 1938, they wanted me to go back in. I had a good job and I said, "Hell with you. You wouldn't take me when I needed," you know? But then they—I got drafted in—I had my letter from [Franklin D.] Roosevelt in December—no, the beginning of January, that's when I went in, in January of forty-two [1942] or forty-one [1941] or whatever it was.

MH: Right. And what'd you do when you came out of the service?

JV: When I came out?

MH: Yeah.

JV: Well, I decided I'm not gonna do what my brothers and other people did: they took advantage of the \$21 a week for a year. You ever heard of that?

MH: Yeah, I believe so.

JV: The unemployment offered to pay the soldiers \$21 a week. What was the thing, 21/52? Oh, 52/21: for fifty-two weeks you're paid \$21. I didn't even go to the unemployment. I went to the union that I was working with, in the laundry, and they had a job for me, waiting for me. And I went back and I got a laundry truck in Manhattan. I was driving, delivering laundry in Manhattan. And then I gave the job to a good friend of mine who was married, had a kid; he just got discharged and he had no job, no money, and I gave him the job. And I got—I went to work in the ships, down on the waterfront. I got work for (inaudible) Marine; they were taking them luxury liners that they converted to troop transports back to luxury liners. There was plenty of work, lot of overtime; it was a good job, and I liked it, but I only was there about six to eight months. My brother was a stair-builder and he talked me into going into the stair-building business. I stayed for fifty years.

MH: Oh, okay.

JV: As a stair-builder.

MH: You married?

JV: Yeah. I got married in 1947.

MH: Kids?

JV: Well, the girl I married, her husband was killed in the Bulge. She had a little boy, and we had two other ones: we had three children. Now we got eleven great-grandchildren and ten grandchildren.

MH: And how old are you now?

JV: Eighty-nine.

MH: Eighty-nine. Okay.

JV: Do I sound it?

MH: No, actually you sound pretty good. You got a strong voice.

JV: Yeah.

MH: Anything else you remember about Ohrdruf, about being in there?

JV: Well, there was a lot done and said about Ohrdruf, even that we learned about after we left, and that's how I found out about most of the stuff, from what I—from the guys that were there, from the different companies, and the medics; all the medics were there for a long time. We knew them pretty well, and they used to tell us all about it. What happened, all the ovens were empty. There was a big line of ovens—I don't know how many were there in the line—and they were empty and cleaned out, and that whole room where they did the burning of the bodies there was clean. And the bodies got stacked outside. They were waiting outside, I guess, of the ovens, and I guess they were gonna cremate them, the big pile of bodies that were laying.

And then, the guys went and searched all the buildings, and there was a few German soldiers that stayed, that didn't run, and they surrendered. What they got—they got Intelligence to take care of them; they don't let nobody have them, you know? So, we don't know what they found out from those few soldiers, but the people from Germany that came through there couldn't believe their eyes. They said they didn't know anything about it. Well, who knows if they were telling the truth or not?

MH: Yeah. You weren't there when they marched the townspeople through, though.

JV: No. That happened the next day.

MH: Okay.

JV: We didn't stay there that day, the same day we opened the prison; we left before dark.

MH: Okay. You left before dark?

JV: I think so.

MH: Okay. You didn't see anybody from the 37th Tank Battalion there, did you?

JV: You know, I was very good friends with a lot of guys in the 37th. But one guy claimed he was there, but he was a tank commander in the 37th. How could he be fifty miles away from his battalion when he's a tank commander and going to prison camps? He might have got it mixed up with Buchenwald, I don't know. But I know for a fact nobody from the 37th was there. The only one that was there from the battalion was Irzyk; he came right as quick as we told—

MH: Wait, he says—I talked to Irzyk, I went to his house. He told me he didn't go up there until the next morning.

JV: Oh, the next morning?

MH: Yeah.

JV: Oh, I didn't know. I thought he was there that night.

MH: No. He didn't go up till the next morning.

JV: Oh, 'cause that's when he notified the division and the Army and everybody else.

MH: Yeah, 'cause—there's other people from the other combat command. Harry Feinberg was in—²

JV: Well, Harry's a good friend of mine, but I don't think he was there. He claims he was —

MH: Yeah.

JV: And I can't believe he was, because if you're a tank commander in a company, how could you go thirty-five miles away from your company, and they're in combat, and go to the prison camp? They didn't even know about the prison camp when we took it; they

² Harry Feinberg was also interviewed for the Concentration Camp Liberators Oral History Project. The DOI for his interview is C65-00041.

were miles away. I don't believe Harry was there. And 'cause we let him do all the speeches he wanted to make, he said somebody—I forget who he said—ordered him to go there. What for?

MH: There's actually a photo of the battalion surgeon from the 37th taken—

JV: Right, Dr. Scotti.

MH: Right.

JV: Yeah, he's a good friend of mine, too. Yes, he was the first one that they brought in there.

MH: So, how did—

JV: And he discovered a grave there with 2,000 bodies in it.

MH: Right. But if Scotti was from the other combat command—

JV: No, no, no, no—Scotti was—oh, wait a minute. Dr. Scotti—the 37th Tank Battalion—yeah, that's another battalion. That's another combat command.

MH: Right, so how did—so, they must have been there if Scotti was there.

JV: Not when we opened the gate. It was long after we got in there.

MH: Okay.

JV: My company was the only—now, we might, sometimes when we go on these special—my company, in my ten months in combat, was about four or five times given orders for specific targets, to go straight for that target. Don't do any fighting, bypass them, go through the Germans, but go to the town of whatever we were after. And once in a while—like, for instance, Avranches: we were given orders that we had to drive fifty miles to save a bridge from being blown up, in Avranches. We drove as fast as we could to get

there. And when we did get there, we found we had two or three infantrymen with us to take care of prisoners, 'cause tank men can't take care of prisoners. You know, you can't guard prisoners from a tank.

MH: Right.

JV: If we had to take a couple of them with us, we'd sit them up on the front of the tank right in front of the 75, in front of the gun.

MH: Yeah.

JV: And we told them if they did anything wrong we'd blow that gun: we'd blow them off of the tank with the gun. And they rode the front of the tank. Infantrymen rode with us in our tanks, when we had them; a lot of the times we had infantrymen, we used to take them with us on our tanks.

MH: Right.

JV: But when we went to Ohrdruf, we only had—there might have been a couple infantrymen there from the 51st [Infantry Battalion].

MH: Okay, let me read something to you and you tell me what you think. This is from an oral history of this guy Bruce Fenchel, who died about a month ago, who was in the 8th Tank Battalion. He says, "On April 1, we crossed the Werra River, bypassing Eisenbach to the north and thus avoiding the autobahn and the main roads. On the way to Gotha, the tanks overran—"

JV: Gotha, that's the name of the town out of Ohrdruf; that was our target.

MH: Okay. "On the way to Gotha, the tanks overran a Wehrmacht Panzer tank school and two huge airfields concealed in the dense woods. Gotha surrendered at 1030 April 4. Prior to Gotha surrendering, in the early hours of the morning, the 8th Tank Battalion drove south. A detached unit of five reconnaissance tanks was sent out to observe the area immediately to our front. While sitting still and looking through my binoculars, I noticed several soldiers running in a ditch. I said, 'If we're the forward echelon, who in the hell are they?' We noticed them cross the road. The tank commander yelled, 'Kick her in the ass.' This, of course, meant full speed ahead. As we moved from our field position onto

the road, we soon heard the machine gun and small arms fire. We then came upon some large steel gates that were locked. The command came, 'Ram them!' We were liberating the Ohrdruf concentration camp, the first German concentration camp encountered in Germany. Soon, men were coming out of the woods. They were survivors who had hidden in the woods." And it goes on.

JV: That wasn't my company or my battalion. I can tell you that, because wherever we went—you know how my job was? I had the dirtiest job in the battalion. Whatever company was—every couple of days Irzyk would change the lead company, and then you'd have like—I mean, yeah. And A Company would be—say today's A Company. I would have to be the second tank back from the point, 'cause if they knock something out on the road, I gotta push it off the road, keep it open for the trucks. Tanks probably could get around, but a lot of roads were narrow, and if they—like a German—our planes knocked out a Tiger tank right across the highway. I don't know if the crew just abandoned it and ran or the tank was really out of commission. It's a sixty-ton tank and I got a thirty-ton tank, and I had to get it off the road, and I did. It took me twenty minutes until little by little I kept inching and inching it till I got it to the edge and pushed it over.

MH: What kind of tank are you driving?

JV: A Sherman.

MH: A Sherman? Okay, and it's only a thirty-ton tank?

JV: Thirty tons.

MH: And the Tigers were sixty.

JV: Sixty tons, and the Super Tiger or whatever they called it was a little heavier, about sixty-five tons, something like that. That's a mistake they made: they put too much weight on them for them. They had a good tank, but we could beat them; we could go faster than them in reverse, very slow. But anyway, whatever company was in the—then, B Company was in the lead the next day, then I would be with B Company. They would ask for me, they want a 'dozer with them. C Company was in the lead, they want a 'dozer with them.

As a matter of fact, I'll tell you a story that has nothing to do with the prison. I was attached to C Company; they were taking the lead. At five o'clock in the morning, I drove

out to my tank commander, we went to C Company, and we had to go along with them. We came to the Moselle River in France, and we had to cross the river. So, the company commander—he died a few years ago, but none of us cared for the guy, he was chicken. He told us, my tank commander, and said, “Go across the river and find out what kind of condition the river is in. We have to cross it.” I said, “What, is he kidding? Why doesn’t he go across himself?”

But anyway, they gave us an order. We went across the river. We cut the bank on the other side so the tanks could climb up the bank. When we got across—then another platoon came across, then the rest of the company came across, then the battalion came across, and that company commander was still on the other side. He was the last one to cross in the division. He got a medal of congressional—the Distinguished Service Cross for being the first American across the Moselle from Patton. I was fit to be tied.

MH: Yeah.

JV: But that’s just a story, you know? That’s the way they handed out medals.

MH: Well, the officers always got the higher medals.

JV: Oh, sure. And he was a captain, a company commander, and he got the Distinguished Service Cross. But he was not the first American, he was—I think he was the last American in the war to go across the Moselle. But you know—his name was Marshall. I don’t want to hurt the guy; the guy’s dead now. But he was captured by the Germans. Then we caught up to a bunch of Germans and we found—one of our tank commanders had a German prisoner with Marshall’s fancy boots on; he had these fancy boots with the fur lining sticking out. They were warm boots and he recognized them right away. He said, “This guy’s got Marshall’s boots on. We’ll have to shoot him.” So, he questioned the person where he got the boots, and he said he got them off an American prisoner. And then eventually we caught up to them and found Marshall and freed him. He got away, and he got his boots back and everything; we got the boots for him. Funny things happen in a war, you know?

MH: They do. They do.

JV: Yeah, a lot of strange stories.

MH: I’m still—I can’t sort out—you know, I got so many different people saying they

got to Ohrdruf—

JV: Well, I—

MH: —and the military records don't help.

JV: No, but I'll tell you the truth. Did Irzyk tell you his side?

MH: Oh, yeah. I went to his house and spent—

JV: Did you talk to Captain Kieley?

MH: No.

JV: Leonard Kieley, he lives in Maine.

MH: Captain Leonard Kieley?

JV: He was—well, he was bigger than that then he was now, but he—you wanna talk to him?

MH: Sure.

JV: Wait a minute, I got his number. We're very, very close, you know; we've been so close we were like brothers all the way through the past sixty years after that war. We're just like—nobody recognize any rank or anything, you know?

MH: Uh-huh.

JV: But we were a good outfit and we did a lot. Now, let me see. (mumbles to himself) Here it is here, the address is....

MH: Okay, what's the phone number?

JV: Oh, wait a minute, ... and then there's another number.... I don't know what the hell that is.

MH: Okay. And it's Captain—

JV: He was our company commander for quite a while. He replaced Captain—I mean Captain [Chuck] Stauber. Captain Stauber is the one that took us into Europe, and then when he got promoted to G-2, Kieley became our company commander.

MH: And Kieley was company commander when you got to Ohrdruf?

JV: Was all the rest of the war, yup.

MH: Okay.

JV: Yeah, I think he—yeah, I'm pretty sure he was. I get mixed up with these promotions. But anyway, he was placed under arrest by Colonel [Hayden A.] Sears for disobeying a direct order on the field of battle in the face of the enemy, which meant firing squad, and it was a joke. Every man in the 51st Infantry Battalion, 4th Armored division, every man in the 8th Tank Battalion signed a petition, and a lawyer—one of our captains was a lawyer, and he said, "You know, if you sign this petition, you're committing mutiny." We said, "Fine, then we'll all go to jail; at least we'll get the hell out of here." So, anyway, all of the CCA, CCB, CCC, all the commanders from them combat commands said, "Don't court-martial Kieley, give him to me. Give him to me." They all wanted him, 'cause he was so good. And Patton and General [John Shirley] Wood made him change his mind and they dropped all the charges.

MH: What supposedly did he do?

JV: Well, if I—you don't mind listening to the story?

MH: No!

JV: It's only a couple seconds.

MH: Sure.

JV: We were on the top of a hill and looking down at a small city. It was open fields, no woods, no nothing, wide open. The 51st Infantry, A Company—and A Company and the 8th Tank Battalion were together. Our orders were to take that town or city. So, Captain Kieley and the captain of the infantry division said, "Well, what are we gonna do? Let's find out what's in there." So, they contacted G-2, and G-2 said it's heavily loaded with enemy—with all kinds of stuff; they're gonna defend the town. So, Kieley said to the infantry guy, "Look, we'll go down in, we'll call for an artillery"—AT&T, that's—

MH: Time and Target.

JV: You know, all the targets, whatever they call it.

MH: Right. Yeah.

JV: Well, anyway, and he said, "We'll go in under the artillery, and then once we get in there, we'll settle them, quiet them down and take it over; you guys come in and clean it up." So, that's the way we worked with the infantry all the time: we didn't ever let those guys go in front of the tanks. So, Sears drives up in the meantime, and he says, "What the hell are you waiting for? You're supposed to get down there!" And they said, "We're waiting for the artillery to put a barrage over the town." [Colonel Sears asks] "Well, who ordered the artillery?" He [Kieley] said, "We did." He [Sears] said, "Well, you have no business" He [Kieley] said, "I'm the one who calls the artillery—calls it off."

So, they ordered us to go, and we went. And he ordered the infantry in front of the tanks. He killed almost half of them, which was stupid, you know? And they had to do it, so we did it, we got down there, and then when we got almost into the town we got in front of the infantry: we forced ourselves in front of them to save those guys. They were being machine gunned all over the place. So, we got in and we took over the town, and the infantry cleaned up.

He [Sears] comes down and he was—the colonel was all pissed off about the infantry going in in front of the tanks; he said he didn't order that and blah-blah. And Kieley—you won't believe this, but the two captains, the infantry company captain and Captain Kieley, they both jumped in the jeep, took their .45s out and loaded it, and they ran up the

hill after him. They were gonna kill him, that's how mad they were, 'cause they lost so many guys. They were really mad and they were flying up that hill, and he saw them coming. He took off, the colonel, and the next day the MPs [military police] were there picking Kieley up and putting him under arrest for disobeying a direct order in the field of battle.

But anyway, it was a big joke on his part. He was—he came in the Army as a—when we first met him, he was a colonel, a full bird colonel, and he was a full bird colonel when the war ended and everybody under him became generals. He never got the star. But that's a good story, and when you—if you talk to Kieley, ask him about it. I don't know the town or the hill we were at—like I told you, I don't know the names of the places—but if you remind him, say, “I heard you were arrested for disobeying a direct order,” and then he'll tell you the story, maybe a little better than what I tried to explain it.

MH: When's the last time you talked to him?

JV: About a month ago I called him up. About a month, two months ago. Yeah.

MH: Okay.

JV: He's a hell of a nice guy. We had so much fun at the conventions. Really, really good guy. We all loved him.

MH: Okay, and he was at Ohrdruf with you?

JV: Huh? Ohrdruf? Oh, yeah. He was the—I'm pretty sure he was the company commander.

MH: Okay.

JV: I can't be positive, 'cause so many different things happened, you know? Sometimes guys get promoted or transferred and we don't even know about it till way long after, you know? When you're in a tank like that, probably most of the time you're with your crew and yourself, and you don't socialize with the other guys in your company. Everybody stays in the tank and you're ready to move all the time. My first day in combat I got out of my tank, dug myself a nice foxhole, got my shelter, got in the hole, made myself nice and comfortable, and just laid down in that tank, and a shell hits about twenty feet away. I

jumped up, went back in the tank and I didn't come out for ten months.

MH: (laughs) Okay.

JV: I would never go out in a foxhole again. And an infantryman—we tried, begged him to come into the tank under an artillery barrage. I said, “Come on, jump in the tank, or go underneath it; go in the tank.” He said “No, no.” We said, “Why won't you come in?” He said, “I saw you guys burn alive, and we're not gonna do that.” The infantry feared getting in the tank and we didn't like getting out of it.

MH: Huh.

JV: Isn't that funny? That's the way you were brought up, you know, when you were raised—

MH: It's what you know, yeah.

JV: Yeah. And, you know, there are a million stories. You could write a dozen books about this war. It was terrible.

MH: Okay. Well, I thank you for your time.

JV: I wish I could help you more. If I knew you were coming I would go digging out—see, I just moved into a senior residence here, where my wife just died. I got a lot of stuff put away and I gotta go digging it out. If I can dig it out, I can check up some of these stories with the history. You got a copy of the history book?

MH: Um, no, but—

JV: Where're you calling from?

MH: Florida.

JV: Oh, you're in Florida?

MH: Yeah.

JV: Oh, then you can go to West Palm Beach and see Irzyk.

MH: Yeah, I was there. I went to Irzyk's house.

JV: Oh, I mean—I'm talking about Kieley, go see Kieley. Not there. Kieley's in Maine.

MH: Kieley's in Maine, yeah.

JV: Yeah, how'd you like Irzyk? He's a nice guy.

MH: Very nice guy, very helpful.

JV: Wonderful. And he's got some family; his son-in-law's a Marine general or something.

MH: Yeah.

JV: He was a great officer. We all loved him very much. The only trouble is, a lot of the company commanders that were with us all the way from Pine Camp to Czechoslovakia, some of them didn't—they didn't care too much about the way he wrote the book. *Up Front with Patton*, something like that, is the name of the book.³ I lost mine. They thought he was putting himself in front of everything too much.

MH: Yeah. You happen to have a picture of yourself from World War II, with your tank?

JV: Yeah. Yeah, I got pictures. Give me your address and I'll make a copy and I'll send it to you.

³ *He Rode Up Front for Patton*, published in 1996 by Pentland Press; he is also the author of *Gasoline to Patton: A Different War*, published in 2005 by Elderberry Press.

MH: Okay, or if you send me the original I'll put it on my computer and send it back to you.

JV: Oh, all right. I can do that.

MH: That'd be easier.

JV: Yeah, you want the tank?

MH: Yeah, you—I'd like a picture of you, or you and your guys and your tank, whichever, whatever is the best.

JV: What I got is—let me see, I gotta check on what I've got. I've got a picture in France, as soon as we jumped off; we were in the town, the first town we're in. About fifty school children came around the tank, curious, and me and the crew were outside the tank talking to the kids. So, there's a picture, I think, of all of us. But I'll find a nice picture for you.

MH: Okay, or if you send a couple, then I'll send them back.

JV: Yeah.

MH: You want me to give you my address?

JV: Yeah. Give me your name and address.

MH: Okay, it's Mike Hirsh, H-i-r-s-h.

JV: Wait, a minute. Mike?

MH: Hirsh.

JV: This damn pen isn't writing.

MH: You were in the same unit with Paul Glaz⁴?

JV: Mike what?

MH: Hirsh. H-i-r-s-h.

JV: Yeah.

MH: ... You know, I—

JV: Okay, Mike.

MH: I met you when you were at the reunion in New Jersey.

JV: Oh, you did?

MH: Yeah, I was there; in fact, I took some pictures there.

JV: Oh. You were supposed to call me from there.

MH: Uh, yeah, I think I tried to call you for a while and I wasn't able to get through, and now that I'm writing I figured I'd better call you and find out what was going on.

JV: I don't know if I helped you any. I tried to get you untangled about the Ohrdruf business.

MH: Yeah, it's all helpful.

JV: You probably know more about Ohrdruf than I do, because by the time we get into

⁴ Paul Glaz was also interviewed for the Concentration Camp Liberators Oral History Project. The DOI for his interview is C65-00048.

there, got into the camp, did what we had to do, and the next thing you know it's time for us to leave, so we really—then what I found out from talking to guys and reading in the books and stuff, that's how I found out more about it.

MH: Yeah.

JV: But I can tell you this: as a tank driver in the A Company, 8th Tank Battalion, we opened the doors to Ohrdruf, and as far as I know, there was nobody with us. Maybe a couple of infantrymen; I'm not sure.

MH: Yeah.

JV: There was no other tanks, no other vehicles, no other guys from any other battalion or anything with us. We were the only company. And, like I told you, five times in the war we were picked by Irzyk to go take a target that was very important to be taken as fast as we can, so we speed to go bypass the Germans at like—I don't know if you know the story of Avranches, but when we got there this bridge went over this river and then the town was straight up in the air, a cliff, straight up about eighty feet high. Then there was a town along the river way up there, and the Germans put guns in all the houses in the windows, 88s and whatever they had. And we were down in this apple orchard on the other side of the river.

We checked the bridge out. It got dark and it was—the German regiment was trying to get to the bridge to get out of here. They were on their way back, retreating, and they—we took about 300 of them. Kieley wasn't company commander then; he was a lieutenant, and he was guarding them prisoners with a machine gun on a jeep. I said, "How can he take 200 prisoners?" And then it got dark and a guy in my tank screwed up, fired at the prisoners. They were surrendering like crazy, and he goes—we got there just before dark and he sees all these Germans lined up with their hands up, and he shoots the machine gun at them, and they all panicked and they all ran amuck. They went crazy. And here we are fighting infantrymen with tanks: we couldn't fight them. Stauber was our company commander and he took us—we left there, went up the road about fifty—no, about five miles up the road.

We pulled in a field and parked. We made a big circle to protect ourselves, and we could see German tanks about 100 yards away. They thought we were Germans so that's why there was no fighting there. But anyway, soon as it started getting daylight we took off again to Avranches to save the bridge. We did save the bridge, but while we were there, the Germans zeroed in over that apple orchard where we were in on the side of the river. And the Germans opened up—they fired five shots and they knocked out three tanks of

ours, and killed a lot of our guys. We emptied every bit of ammunition we had in the tanks, and the nearest American outfit was too far away to help us.

The only thing that could help us was air. Our battalion commander, he got help from the air. The P-47s came out and broke it up. Patton—we took fifteen thousand prisoners that day. And Patton came up and he's leading the prisoners, but he didn't do shit. We did. We lost the men, we did the fighting. He took credit for the prisoners. (laughs)

MH: Of course. One other question about Ohrdruf: what time of day did you knock those gates down?

JV: I think it was about—I'm not sure, but it could have been around noon time.

MH: Okay.

JV: It could have been, 'cause I—that's another thing: we don't look at the clocks when you're moving with the tanks. I'm guessing it's about noon, 'cause it was quite a few hours before it got dark.

MH: Okay.

JV: All right?

MH: All right, thank you very much. I really appreciate it.

JV: Nice talking to you, Mike. I'll send you them pictures as soon as I can find some decent ones.

MH: Okay. Thank you.

JV: All right?

MH: Bye-bye.

End of interview