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Jean Fenchel oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, November 30, 2008

Jean Fenchel (Interviewee)

Michael Hirsh (Interviewer)

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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. This interview begins in mid-sentence.]

Jean Fenchel: —saw [Dwight D.] Eisenhower and [Omar] Bradley, and who was the other one? Oh, and [George S.] Patton.

Michael Hirsh: Right.

JF: Yeah. In fact, his tank was first at that point, because he was in reconnaissance and broke down the gates. Yeah, he said the sight was awful, and those pictures are in there, everywhere. And he has worked on documentation that his tank was there on April 4, 1945. He had a history nut down the street that rode here, that wanted to be sure of that, so Bruce really did search that one out. I think he read [Albin] Irzyk's book and Patton's book.¹ And he's got—he had the one that, you know, was done closer to—right after the war.

MH: But he did talk to you about knocking down the gate?

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

JF: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. And he actually had a picture of himself, and it's here somewhere—in fact, we put it in the obituary—where he was standing in front of his tank. When we went to visit Ohrdruf—it was a German training camp. It had first been Russian and then German. Right away, you know, he said who he was at the gates, and they let him come in, and there was another couple and me. They said, “Well, the rest of them can't come in, but I want to take you up to the commandant.” Anyway, the commandant saw the picture and was real interested and all that, and lined up an officer or sergeant or something to take us around.

At any rate, you know, they plastered—they wanted to see us the next day, and blew up the picture in the meantime and hung it on their wall. So it was—you know, that was pretty interesting, to see the same area. He pointed to where his tank had come down the hill, and they could see this and they could hear the machine guns shooting people who were still alive. It was, you know, gruesome. So, yeah, he told me about all of that.

MH: Did he have any contact with Irzyk in the past few years?

JF: He was always going to do that, and I don't know; it was like—I think he was afraid to. He had said he was going to, and then he'd say, “Oh, I'm going to do that next week. I'll be ready,” and you know, just never did get him called. But he had his book. So, I don't know. I just think—I think he was just concerned that Irzyk would flip him off, and I don't believe that would have happened.

MH: Yeah, I don't think so, either.

JF: Oh, I don't know. Sometimes, he was like that.

MH: Okay. What is your name?

JF: Jean Fenchel.

MH: Jean. Okay. And you said he died when, in October?

JF: October 19.

MH: October 19.

JF: He had a—he's had heart issues most of his life. His first heart attack was at twenty-nine; he had a bypass just before we were married in eighty-seven [1987]—wait, he had it in eighty-six [1986]. So, he was having heart valve trouble, and it just closed up on him all of a sudden, and he was gone.

MH: Okay. Well, I thank you very, very much for calling me back.

JF: Yeah.

MH: I really appreciate it.

JF: I'm sorry I can't help you more.

MH: That's okay. Thank you. He didn't take any pictures in the camp, did he?

JF: No. You mean when he was there?

MH: Yeah, during the war?

JF: No. He didn't have a camera, no.

MH: All right. Well, thank you very much. I sure appreciate you calling me back.

JF: You bet.

MH: Okay, bye.

Pause in recording

MH: That was Jean Fenchel, wife of Bruce D. Fenchel, F-e-n-c-h-e-l. He was in the 4th Armored Division, 8th Tank Battalion, that got to Ohrdruf.

End of interview