

Interview with Roy Johnson

Leigh Anne Howard

May 20, 2005

Q: This is Roy Johnson. It's May 20th, 2005 and I am in Bowling Green, Kentucky at the 18th Field Artillery Reunion, and he's got pictures and cards and papers that he's going to talk about.

A: There's one right there that's a good story.

Q: Okay.

A: Here's a good story about (inaudible?) Maneuvers from Babenhausen to Baumholder in Germany, West Germany. In the tank our M43 long times, we called them, went up by 1.55 millimeters, and we were going through this little town and the gun... one of the gun barrels caught the corner of a building and tore it out. I happened to be following the tank when that had happened. A German stuck his head out of the upstairs window... it was early in the morning... he said, "Was it IOS?" You know he said, "What's going on here?" We tore the building apart. Then shortly after that, one of the guys was riding in our weapons carrier... our ammo carrier... it was a track type vehicle that got run over. It killed him. His foot got caught in the track, and he couldn't get off from it, and it pulled him right under the track.

Q: Wow. You see that kind of thing in the movies.

A: I know it...

Q: You know it? I can't imagine being there.

A: And that was on that same maneuver that this happened. And then on another maneuver, we were going down the Czech border. We were up in the mountains, and the truck ahead of me got into a rut in the road, and it pulled him off the side of the road and he rolled over down the mountain and that's a picture of the truck right there.

Unknown: Who's was that?

A: That was Scratch. You remember Scratch?

Unknown: Yeah.

A: Yeah that's him... that's the truck he was in. He didn't get hurt.

Unknown: You remember when [Gas Rack] wrecked my truck, didn't you?

A: Yeah, yeah. I remember that, yeah. Anyway, that was kind of exciting there when that happened. And here's a picture of the Bonhoeffer, that's the train station in Germany, and the roof is gone but the glass in the front was still there actually.

Q: Really?

A: It was cracked and broken.

Q: You would have thought that would have been the first to go.

A: I know it, but it was the way it was made, you know.

Q: Yeah.

A: And here was the barracks. First, when we got to Germany we lived in tents. I got pictures of it if I can find it.

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Q: This is the tent city.

A: Yeah. There's the guard duty with the tents there right behind it, but I got another picture here that shows the pup tents we slept in.

Unknown: Slept in there about ten months, didn't we?

A: Yeah, until the barracks were built. There's some pictures of Bonhoeffer.

Unknown: Oh my gosh, Bonhoeffer. Had planks that would go in over your knees, in mud.

A: Let me show you, I'd like to show you, though, the tents. It really is neat; there's the background of some more.

Q: Okay.

A: See the tents? We lived in that for the longest time.

Q: One person or two people?

A: Two people.

Q: Two people to one of these?

A: See each one of us had a half a shelter hat, that's part of the tent.

Q: Okay.

A: And then when you get two, you just put them together and it made a tent.

Q: Ah, okay.

A: So, we crawled in that. That's what we slept in, but it was nice weather when we got there, and then when the barracks was built then winter came on. So, we were all snuggled up.

Q: When did you get there?

A: September of, September, I can tell you...

Unknown: September '50, wasn't it? 1951?

A: 1951. Here's the special orders. The people listed here were cleared to go to those different countries. These papers are, like, 55 years old. And I was trying to find, here's another special paper.

Q: That looks different.

A: This is a different one. Special orders, and we used to go into Berlin and confiscate...

Unknown: That wasn't cleared (laughter).

A: Here's our general orders. Fort Sill, January 8th of '51.

Q: So, what's the difference between a general order and one of these special orders you're talking about?

A: These orders covers everybody. Special orders just cover special people.

Q: To do? What did you have to do that it would be special?

A: Well, at that time we were supposed to pull border control on the Iron Curtain. It was after the war.

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Q: Okay.

A: And the Russians were on one side and we were on the other, and we would pull maneuvers over there at night. Blackout (inaudible?) You don't know what's going to happen. But, but that's the difference between general orders and special orders. Special orders were just for special people, and general orders covers the whole unit. Here's the picture of our base. That's an administration building there.

Q: This is in Babenhausen...

A: Babenhausen, Germany, and here's the picture of the ship that took us from New York to Bremerhaven.

Unknown: General Sturgis.

A: Yep, USS Sturgis.

Q: General Sturgis was the name of the ship?

A: Well, remember when we came back in the marine carp?

Unknown: Yeah, I came back on the General (inaudible?)

A: Okay...

Q: It took you 16 days to get over there?

A: Yeah.

Q: What was it like to be on the ship? You said that you were there with hundreds of people?

A: Well, oh yeah, 5,000.

Q: 5,000?

A: 5,000. There was a whole mess, mixture of people, but we had a radar problem when we left, and then we had to go down to Norfolk, and have new radar reception put on. I got a picture of the radar.

Unknown: They (inaudible?) up there all night, didn't they?

A: Yeah, they did.

Unknown: Yeah, I remember seeing the jellyfish.

A: (laughter) There's a picture of the radar. The ship, that one went bad, and they replaced it.

Q: What did you do on the ship?

A: Regular duty, like, kitchen work and cleaning and, you know, stuff like that. Whatever duties we needed.

Q: Just for the group to survive to get over there at that time period.

A: Here we crossed the Rhine River; you remember that on the way over there?

Unknown: Remember when the tank went through the building?

A: I got a picture of that.

Unknown: Went in this guy's bedroom.

A: Remember that (inaudible?) sticking his head out (laughter)?

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Unknown: Yeah, yeah, I remember that.

A: I was right behind him. That's why I got the picture.

Unknown: Ran right into the building.

A: Remember the guy that got killed in that halftrack?

Unknown: Yeah, yeah.

A: Yeah, that was terrible. Pulled him right under that tracks.

Unknown: I remember that.

A: Remember when that German got run over by that truck?

Unknown: They were standing on the corner watching.

A: Oh, was ya? I didn't see that one, but I heard about it.

Unknown: Yeah, I saw that. It run right over him with the back wheels.

A: Oh, my goodness, there was another picture of Baumholder. Another story is about these little, little Czech kids bringing us wine. We were on maneuvers on Czech border, and they'd bring us wine, and we'd give them a buck or two because they're poor.

Unknown: Buy them a candy bar, something.

A: Yeah, a candy bar, and we got a picture of some of these kids here.

Q: The candy bars were issued?

A: You know, C rations.

Unknown: Coffee, cans of coffee.

A: Here's the truck that I drove, I was in communications then.

Q: Are one of these pictures you?

A: Yeah.

Q: Which one is you?

A: That's me.

Q: This one?

A: Well, let me see here. Yeah, that's Sergeant Jennings.

Unknown: Sergeant Jennings? Oh yeah, I remember him.

A: Yeah, okay. And there's a picture of one of those German little towns; they don't have farms over there. They all live in little towns, and they go out in the country and they work the ground they farm, but they don't have houses on them.

Unknown: You've never brought these pictures before?

A: I just found them in my duffel bag about a month ago.

Unknown: Oh my gosh, is that right? Isn't that something? You still had your duffel bag?

A: Yeah, yeah.

Unknown: You should have brought it.

A: Well, I could have.

Unknown: When they shipped mine back someone broke in and took a lot of my stuff.

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Q: Were you drafted into the military?

A: Yes, in 1950.

Q: Okay.

A: It was December 7 in 1950. Read some of the army identification...

Q: Oh, that you were showing me yesterday?

A: Yeah, and here's some memorabilia from houses that were in different places, son-me Germany some in Fort Sill. I don't know if that's useful to you, but if you wanted to use them, you're welcome to. (Inaudible?) Oh, there's something, by golly. I bet nobody even knows what it's even for. This is German's, by the way, German baklava, see if I can find that can opener.

Q: What's a field ration permit?

A: I used to go back from border patrol and back to our main camp and pick up the mail for the unit and that ration let me stop. It was a 101 -mile trip one way, and I could stop and get gas and get something to eat. That would give me the right to stop at any military base.

Q: You have a lot of power it seems. You got special orders and you got these permits.

A: It was at the time, but I was going to show you a map of where I had to go, Baumholder where we got deployed back to our main base and here's the name of the town, we went from Babenhausen to Baumholder. One side is the starting point. This is the town I had to go through and when you get to there you flip it over and you go here, and you end up with Baumholder. I don't know how many miles; it was all those towns to go through.

Q: Ah. I'd like to make a copy of this.

A: You're welcome to it.

Q: If I could, you got the names on there.

A: We got a little German gal here that can read Jewish; she was a war bride.

Q: Oh really?

A: Tell her to come here, we need a translator here. But anyway, this is something that I don't think you could find it anywhere else. I kept that because I used it every day.

Q: Yeah. I would like to make a copy before we leave today. That would be very helpful.

A: And any of the pictures, you are welcome to and where's she at?

Unknown: This writing I can read, but the small one I can't because I forgot my reading glasses. What are you looking for, kid?

A: A little can opener, an army can opener.

Unknown: A can opener?

A: People don't even know what that is, but you can open cans with that.

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Q: Yeah and it works?

A: Perfect, it works like a dream. I just happened to keep one of them.

Q: That's cool.

A: It is.

Unknown: Now I have my glasses back.

A: Okay, now you can read some of the towns, you might know them.

Unknown: Towns, I wasn't from there.

A: No, but you might know where they're at. You might have been there.

Unknown: I got a German map.

A: I forgot to bring that one.

Unknown: It's Baumholder, yeah, no?

A: Yeah. All these little towns we had to go through to get back to base.

Unknown: No, I mostly go, I fly in through Frankfurt, and then I have friends in Stuttgart and (inaudible?) until I go to my hometown, to Augustdorf by Bavaria.

A: Oh okay, see they sent me to school down in Bavaria, or down in Stuttgart. We operated a camera on a L-17, a liaison plane. I run a camera for a while, 8 months, and they sent me down there to go to school.

Unknown: You know what the Passion Play is? We see this when they had the 360th anniversary in 1976.

A: You did?

Unknown: Yeah down in, no '84, it was '84. '76 we had our daughter with us, we went to Navy Fort, took a neighbor with us.

A: Oh okay.

Unknown: Her husband passed away in '83 so we were friends and my cousin got me tickets for the Passion Play. That was unbelievable.

A: It is, they have live animals and everything, camels...

Unknown: Well no, no, no...

A: They did here in South Dakota.

Unknown: That's over there they've been doing that, well 260 years anniversary.

A: Oh my gosh.

Unknown: And then you only have it every ten years.

A: Okay, they have this every year. The Passion Play here in South Dakota, I thought it was originated from Germany.

Unknown: It's just like in Israel, what they show you over there, you know.

A: They tell the crucifixion and everything else.

Unknown: And it's so long that we went out for lunch to a restaurant, and you come back again.

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Q: I think he's trying to get you organized so we should probably continue here for a little bit. Tell me what it was like to leave the US and get on this ship...

A: At that time, we were kids, you know? And everything was new to us and it was exciting, and we took our basics in Fort Sill, Oklahoma and they let us come home, and when I come home on furlough before I went over there, I got married.

Q: Oh okay.

A: Got married and then I met the unit in Camp Kilmer, New Jersey, and that's where we boarded the ship. The radar was bad, so we went down to Norfolk and had new radar...

Q: Was this your first time away from home?

A: Yeah, really, and then when we went over, we run into terrible storms. We all got seasick and, you know, it took us a long time to get there. Sixteen days. We landed in Bremerhaven. They put us on the German trains, the narrow gates trains, and they transported us right to Babenhausen and that's where we was stationed for the duration. We got transferred all over from there, you know.

Q: Right.

A: And maneuvers and border patrol and go to wherever they needed us, you know? And we had a lot of things happen during that time, but I just told you some of it.

Q: Right.

A: People getting killed, you know, and that and we had a time where we got a terrific rain storm up in the mountains in the German's... what do they call those mountains over there? Anyway, it got muddy and our heavy equipment got bogged down in the mud.

Q: A lot of your pictures have lots...

A: Well that's some of the area that's, during those torrential rains and we had tank retrievers come in and the guy that... this Pitts that's on the list here he's dead now, he died of cancer... but he was the driver of one of these tank retrievers, and he was coming there to pick those heavy guns up, you know, get them out of the mud and he got stuck. We just had to dig them out by hand, what a job - but that's some of the things you go through, you know, living out in the open, it was an exciting time. We learned a lot, you learn how the other half of the world lives... and Germany is a fantastic country, really. People ever get acquainted with it and go over there, ah, those people are sharp. They know how to live, too. But all in all, I tell you, a college degree when you come back from a couple years of service, you learned a lot. But now, any other questions you have?

Q: I just, one other question. How did you stay in touch with your wife? And what was that like for you?

A: You didn't, just letters is all. We tried to call a couple times, you know, then you didn't have communications with phones. Just letters, you'd get a letter, but it would be a couple weeks old. No, it wasn't that good, communications wasn't. But everybody was in the same boat, so we never paid much attention to it. And if they send something to you it's usually destroyed before you got there, because transportation...

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Q: Yeah.

A: Yeah, we got along good. We all stayed together. The whole duration of our career, and we got so close to one another. Well, you can see some of these people here.

Q: Yeah, they are working on that so we should probably wrap it up. I'll be here all weekend, so if there's something that think of or that you want to talk about...

A: Or if you have more questions...

Q: Then we will pull out the recorder. I would like to make a copy of your map.

A: Sure, and here's an old, trip ticket... if you know what a trip ticket is. That's what they look like. That would give you the right to some of the vehicles anytime you wanted and that was what a trip ticket was for.

Q: Yeah.

A: It was a good thing for me because I used it sometimes just for pleasure (laughter). I shouldn't say that.

Q: Well, you know, it happens. And as I said, I do have a little bit of paperwork for you as well that we had talked about.

A: It's something else.

Q: It's amazing that you were able to find your items for today.

A: I thought, well, maybe somebody will be interested in them.

Q: I need you to sign that.

A: Okay.

Q: And then...

A: I'm a lefty here.

Q: I need to get you to fill this sheet out, but why don't I try to catch you sometime this afternoon and you can fill it out while I am talking to someone else.

A: Alrighty.