

**Interviewer:** I mean start, just say your name and your birthday.

**Earl Lerch:** My name is Earl Lerch. I was born in May the 20<sup>th</sup>, 25’.

**Interviewer:** Ok. And were you born, where were you born?

**Earl Lerch:** I was born uh, a little town, Elizabethtown, Pennsylvania. Right outside of Hershey Pennsylvania.

**Interviewer:** Ok, now what was your family doing till?

**Earl Lerch:** When we, well, I was born in this little town, my dad worked for Kleins’ Candy and uh, when he got laid off, my grandfather got out, was in the hospital, so they had a 50 acre farm he bought for \$2100. And uh, so we moved to the country, and uh, in 1937 so I was 12 years old when we moved out in the country.

**Interviewer:** Now what was, how big was your family, like what did it consist of at the time?

**Earl Lerch:** There was 14 in all, but I had a baby sister that lived four hours and a brother that lived eight months, so there was 12 of us, plus my mother and dad.

**Interviewer:** And uh, what, what was life like growing up in that uh, like the depression era, era time, in that, in Pennsylvania?

**Earl Lerch:** Well, by living in this little town, everybody uh, well we delivered papers, uh they would have stores that would have sale, we get them in the mail now and we’d go around, people laugh at me, we went around on Saturdays, when we had to deliver these papers to all the houses, you’d hit every phonebook, phone booth and you would find a nickel or ten cents on a Saturday to have spending money, we didn’t have spending money.

**Interviewer:** Right and uh, where, were you without a lot of thing, did you remember?

**Earl Lerch:** Yeah, we didn’t have much. We had two pair of shoes, one to go to school, one to go to Sunday, Sunday school and church, and when the one wore out and you got another pair and uh, everybody helped, we had Christmas, we would get a little toy, one little toy, that’s all. And uh, and uh, the neighbors and people in town bought it for us because they were big and nobody made any money then.

**Interviewer:** Uh, was it, ya’ll were farmers right?

**Earl Lerch:** Yeah, we went from the city to the farm, then we end up farming.

**Interviewer:** Well, as farmers were you producing enough to make enough money to have extra money or were just producing enough to uh, ...

**Earl Lerch:** Live on?

**Interviewer:** Yeah.

**Earl Lerch:** Ok. When my dad got laid off, he went to Hershey, because when we moved out in the country we had the Hershey route, so we were actually four miles outside of Hershey. And uh, we ate everything we grow and he worked, he worked at the Hershey Furniture Factory. And Hershey had their own lumber yard, they made their own furniture and they made everything themselves. So that was extra money.

**Interviewer:** I didn't know Hershey ever had a furniture, that's pretty interesting. What do you remembering hearing about European things, about the Germans and their advances and their military buildup, did you hear a lot about that?

**Earl Lerch:** We didn't hear nothing, we didn't hear nothing about that when we were kids.

**Interviewer:** Did ya'll have radios and things that ya'll were listening to?

**Earl Lerch:** Yeah, we had crystal radio.

**Interviewer:** Well, is the first thing you remember being Pearl Harbor, is that the first thing about World War 2?

**Earl Lerch:** Well then I, then I, when I got, when I left, I went to the Army in 43' and then got out in 46' and uh, they always discharge you were you went in, because it save money for transportation. So I stayed at Hershey, and I told some friends when I was in the Army that uh, they, they went to California that's even a year and a half, so 17 months later, I quit Hershey and went to California. And uh, I was uh, while ok, I'm getting ahead, I'm getting ahead of myself, I'm getting back in 47', but in 1941 it was, we heard it on the news, but we were kids, we didn't think much of it.

**Interviewer:** It was just kind of like,

**Earl Lerch:** It was news...

**Interviewer:** Kind of far away.

**Earl Lerch:** Yeah, and it was...

**Interviewer:** Kind of an afterthought.

**Earl Lerch:** Yeah, and we didn't think anymore of it. And then as the days went, we heard more and more, uh, you get the newspaper, but you, we couldn't afford to by a newspaper so, we'd find a paper or someone gave us a paper and we would read it.

**Interviewer:** So you would just get news as much as you could...

**Earl Lerch:** That's it.

**Interviewer:** Or whenever you could get it?

**Earl Lerch:** Yeah.

**Interviewer:** Do you um, were there a lot of people from that town or a few people going out and being drafted or enlisting?

**Earl Lerch:** I couldn't tell you. I don't remember that.

**Interviewer:** No one real close that you...

**Earl Lerch:** No, no. We had uh, when we moved uh, right before we moved out of Hersh..., uh Elizabethtown, we had a family called the Lutrel family, and they had a big family so, my dad would cut their hair and we would do things together and we were all going to enlist, we were all going to enlist in the Navy, and my dad said no and their dad said yeah. They couldn't, couldn't hardly keep them anyways, no money. So they enlisted in the Navy, and I had to wait and had to draft.

**Interviewer:** Because they were of age to be able to sign up for themselves?

**Earl Lerch:** Yeah, yeah.

**Interviewer:** Ok and uh, tell me what you did going up, you wanted to enlist, but your father wouldn't let you, so then you went...

**Earl Lerch:** Well, then I was uh, still uh, I was still working at Hershey.

**Interviewer:** And uh, you got your, tell me about this 6 month deferment.

**Earl Lerch:** Well uh, they, my grandfather uh, went to the hospital and his feet got so bad he couldn't hard walk, so I got a deferment to do farm work, so I went down there and he wouldn't let us ride uh, when you hired, you didn't... like you do today, everything was horses and uh, we would have to walk behind everything we did. I plowed when you are holding the handles up here and uh, it would just uh, we were small and uh, we would have to walk behind Harold, when they would roll the field, when Harold, to break the big chunks up, my grandfather ride that because he said if we fell off, we'd get killed. So uh, we uh, when we cut uh, when we uh, when we cut hay you didn't bail it, you had a rake and it would come along and it would hit a lever and then roll, and you put it in rolls and then you take and do it by hand and put it up on the wagon by hand. And you would put it in the barn by hand. It was hard work, it was hard work.

**Interviewer:** Yeah, well um, ok you were deferred for 6 months and then you finally...

**Earl Lerch:** The they, then uh, they gave us 6 months and I had to report in November.

**Interviewer:** Because you were drafted and uh, where, where did you report to?

**Earl Lerch:** Hershey, Pennsylvania.

**Interviewer:** And uh, did you, were immediately put in the Army?

**Earl Lerch:** I went from Hershey, Pennsylvania, we had to meet at some like 9 in the morning if I remember right and they were taking us to Harrisburg, Pennsylvania and they put us on a train that went to uh, Fort Knox, Kentucky.

**Interviewer:** And now that was for uh, I mean for your basic training?

**Earl Lerch:** For basic training, we were there for 26 weeks.

**Interviewer:** And what uh, what do you recall about your basic training like was it extremely difficult or was it, did you find it pretty easy?

**Earl Lerch:** Yeah, it was, it was, you're young, everything's easy when you're young.

**Interviewer:** You didn't find anything overwhelming, it was all just...?

**Earl Lerch:** No, no. There's something that they had out there in the field, we were, they taught us tank right away, that's what we went into tanks.

**Interviewer:** You didn't go to a normal, just like a basic boot camp, kind of thing, for everyone and then go to a special.

**Earl Lerch:** No, everything was right there in Fort Knox. You had your classes and then you would have to go out and get in tanks and you would have to learn to run guns and clean guns and shoot.

**Interviewer:** So did you do a lot of book work kind of stuff or..?

**Earl Lerch:** No, you didn't do any book work.

**Interviewer:** You just went out to the tanks and started drive.

**Earl Lerch:** Yeah.

**Interviewer:** Were you driver or..?

**Earl Lerch:** At that time, I was a gunner.

**Interviewer:** You were a gunner?

**Earl Lerch:** Ok, it didn't last long because when you close the hatch, I get sick. So, one of the guys was about, assistant driver, I was the uh, gun loader, so he didn't, he wanted to sleep all the time, so he said I'll trade with you, I'll go in the turret so I became assistant driver.

**Interviewer:** But you didn't have any problems with the hatch after that?

**Earl Lerch:** No, no, well you kept the hatch open most of the time. Then you only had the little hatch and you kept it open, one on top, you were, you were closed in, and when you close me in a room, I panic.

**Interviewer:** Wow, I bet that's tough in a tank, that's such close quarters. Um, so did they, you didn't pick being in a tank, you got drafted ...

**Earl Lerch:** I got drafted and they put me in a tank., in the 13<sup>th</sup>, well at that time it was, I don't remember what they called it then, that's was during basic training we didn't have uh, we weren't with no outfit or nothing, we were just training

**Interviewer:** Did you have a lot of night exercises and things like that or...?

**Earl Lerch:** All the time, all the time. You were uh, you didn't have classes during the day, you would have to uh, read maps and then have to go look for enemies at night, uh, we'd have groups going after each and uh, we, if you fell asleep the enemy come in and paint on you.

**Interviewer:** Oh, like signifying...

**Earl Lerch:** That you were asleep and we came in and got you.

**Interviewer:** Were they always trying to harass you to try... keep your?

**Earl Lerch:** Yeah, yeah, they kept us on our toes, yeah.

**Interviewer:** ...try and keep your distance, were you always trying to learn quick decision making and fast...?

**Earl Lerch:** Yeah, yeah.

**Interviewer:** ...and being really efficient?

**Earl Lerch:** Yeah.

**Interviewer:** And uh, how did you, how did you feel about how that prepared you, did you feel, did you feel good when you...

**Earl Lerch:** Well, yeah, yeah, most of us all, I'd say practically all of us did because it was uh, experience, and what they were teaching us how to drive tanks and what was, they showed us what was going to happen, when you went to war, you're going to get killed.

**Interviewer:** So leaving your train you felt you felt prepared to do what you need to?

**Earl Lerch:** Yeah, yeah.

**Interviewer:** And how did you, you went by train to get from Pennsylvania to Fort Knox?

**Earl Lerch:** Yeah.

**Interviewer:** Was this the first time you had been out of Pennsylvania?

**Earl Lerch:** No, when uh, when I was turned 18 in May, we had our 2 weeks vacation, Hershey shut down the can good factory for 2 weeks, then my sister and brother-in-law and another friend went to Highland Park, Illinois. That was an Army base there, so I went out there for a week, and when I was out there, I got my notice, Uncle Sam wanted to talk to me.

**Interviewer:** So uh, did you meet any, were there any people there, or any groups of people there that you had never met before or that you...?

**Earl Lerch:** No, everyone, went I went there, everyone I met was, well we was from Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Virginia, that was that group...

**Interviewer:** So basic kind of area?

**Earl Lerch:** Yeah.

**Interviewer:** And uh, when did you learn about where specifically you were going to go from your training?

**Earl Lerch:** Well, we were just about finished they told us that we were gonna, we were gonna go to uh, uh, Camp Bowie, Texas, where was about an hour and half drive south of Fort Worth Dallas, the uh, they shipped us out. Course we didn't take any of our tanks stuff, they just stayed there. And uh, we went to Camp Bowie Texas for about a year and a half for training.

**Interviewer:** Still training in tanks?

**Earl Lerch:** Still training.

**Interviewer:** Well, what were you doing there that you were doing different at Fort Knox?

**Earl Lerch:** Well, it was strenuous, because there when we were in Camp Bowie, we get up every morning at 5, take calisthenics for 20 minutes, run 5 to 10 miles and uh, that day, morning, come home, did some push-ups and stuff, then you went, then you went and taken a shower and ate breakfast. And that's how you started your day.

**Interviewer:** Wow, that's pretty busy morning.

**Earl Lerch:** It was good, yeah. And for us we had some guys, at that time use if you uh, the oldest they'd take you would be 39 years old, and we had some that were 38 and 39. They couldn't get out there and run like we did. Your 18 years old you can run.

**Interviewer:** Were more older people have different jobs?

**Earl Lerch:** No, were all the same.

**Interviewer:** I didn't know if some of the older people had uh , like a lot of the older ones were probably the drivers or did they split you up anything like that?

**Earl Lerch:** Well they put 5 people to a tank and then that's when I traded and I became assistant driver.

**Interviewer:** Well, did they have any way of saying who was going to get jobs, or they just kind of just, get 5 and...?

**Earl Lerch:** That's it.

**Interviewer:** Hmm, um, well what was like a normal, after the calisthenics and your breakfast, what did you do after that, at the, in Texas?

**Earl Lerch:** I just don't think, uh, then we would uh, we'd, uh, after that we had an hour after we ate, and then uh, we uh, would go out on maneuvers, take our tanks and go out and play war games.

**Interviewer:** I guess it was kind of, mostly desert kind of place?

**Earl Lerch:** It was down in Texas, yeah. It was desert out there and, and uh, then, you'd go out there and play for a couple hours, it was training but it , it was us, we had a good time because I never drove tank and uh...

**Interviewer:** Did they kind of rotate, so everyone got to do...?

**Earl Lerch:** No. You did it all the same time.

**Interviewer:** Oh.

**Earl Lerch:** You did it, same time. Everybody learned to drive, everybody learned to shoot guns and uh.

**Interviewer:** So everyone in your 5, 5 man group, they could do any job at any time pretty much?

**Earl Lerch:** Yes, yes. It was 5 of us and we had uh, Lieutenant Olivers was our platoon leader. I was in his tank, and that was, that helped.

**Interviewer:** Well what type of tanks were you driving?

**Earl Lerch:** Uh, medium tank, 32 ton.

**Interviewer:** Ok, and you stayed in Texas for a year and a half?

**Earl Lerch:** Yes.

**Interviewer:** And uh, what, would this have been 44' or..?

**Earl Lerch:** It was uh, 44' and yeah and 44' and 45', or and, well, we got into January of, December 45', take me back, January, we went over, we went to Europe in January of 45'

**Interviewer:** Yeah, that's what I was getting to, in January 45' uh, when did you learn that you were going to go to Europe?

**Earl Lerch:** About a month before we went, but we weren't allowed, they told us, you didn't tell nobody, that's it.

**Interviewer:** Did your maneuvers and war, did all that stuff change when you found out where you were going?

**Earl Lerch:** No. We just kept doing the same thing.

**Interviewer:** Kept doing the same thing and you felt, and again you felt really prepared?

**Earl Lerch:** Yeah, we felt good. We were going over and we didn't, I didn't worry about dying, you don't at 18, 19 years old.

**Interviewer:** And I guess with all that training it not what you're thinking, you're thinking about what you need to do.

**Earl Lerch:** That's it.

**Interviewer:** To get, you got a job and you need to get the job done.

**Earl Lerch:** Yeah, that's it, yeah.

**Interviewer:** So um, you're in Texas and you're going to go to Europe so where, how do you get from Texas to...?

**Earl Lerch:** It take us about a week, getting us ready, they had to load all our tanks on trains.

**Interviewer:** So you did take your tanks?

**Earl Lerch:** We take our tanks, in Texas we taking our tanks with us. We had uh, I can't remember the name, it was made by Chrysler, it was an air cooled engine, motor engine in those tanks because they were used in the desert because you never had water, so they were air cooled, they were airplane engines, they were round like an airplane engine, and then they went to a Ford tank, which was good, it was faster and better.

**Interviewer:** And so how did you say they got, you got on the train took you from Texas to, to where?

**Earl Lerch:** To uh, New Jersey, Camp, I just read it yesterday and I forgot already, I can't think of the Camp now.

**Interviewer:** Well, in New Jersey.

**Earl Lerch:** In New Jersey, and we were there 2, we were there about 3 weeks, we were trained in abandon ship drills, stuff like that and it uh, what was nice, we'd get on the, side of, well they made it look like ship, we had to go down with all your equipment on, your guns and everything, and go down, and there's suppose to be water down there, but since it's December, Christmas time, everything was froze, so we would go down stood on ice and go right back up, for abandon ship drills.

**Interviewer:** Wow, so then you got on the big ship, and you drove, and you...?

**Earl Lerch:** We went from there to New York and we were there in New York for 2 days on ship, they were loading everything up, getting us ready to...

**Interviewer:** But ya'll can leaving the ship ya'll are staying...

**Earl Lerch:** We had to stay on the ship, yeah.

**Interviewer:** So you got all your supplies and everything together and you went...

**Earl Lerch:** We went from New York, it had taken 13 days to go to Lahave, France.

**Interviewer:** Well, how was the ride over there, was there a lot of...

**Earl Lerch:** Sick.

**Interviewer:** Yeah, I know there was a lot of people who have never been on a ship, especially in rough seas.

**Earl Lerch:** Yeah, yeah, and I didn't bother me, I didn't get sick, I could uh, if you and I was eating, and I ate all the time, I weighed 127 pounds, I never picked up no weight or nothing, if you were getting sick you'd just grab the food and they go and you'd eat it because you were hungry all the time.

**Interviewer:** Were ya'll eating like beans and things like that or did ya'll have...

**Earl Lerch:** Everything, we had everything. They feed us good.

**Interviewer:** Did you have hot meals?

**Earl Lerch:** Well, we had, we got a break uh, we uh, was assigned to kitchen and we emptied the garbage, everything had to be carried from the galley to the deck and it was dumped at 4:00 every morning.

**Interviewer:** Into the ocean?

**Earl Lerch:** Yeah, into the ocean, that's where all the fish and everything, everything was found, and if they dumped at 4, it would be all gone before day light, that way if a submarine wouldn't see it, that way they wouldn't know where we were.

**Interviewer:** Well that's a pretty interesting job um, so you never got sick...

**Earl Lerch:** I didn't get sick no.

**Interviewer:** ...but a lot of them got sick?

**Earl Lerch:** Oh, a lot of them got sick, and they told us, and I don't remember who or why, but somebody said when you get on ship, get on the top bunk, because somebody is going to get thrown up on them.

**Interviewer:** Uhhh.

**Earl Lerch:** And it was rank, and I got a top bunk, so I could sleep.

**Interviewer:** That was a pretty good piece of advice that somebody gave you.

**Earl Lerch:** Yeah, and I don't remember who gave it or why.

**Interviewer:** You wish you could thank them, so you went from, and did ya'll have nay storms or anything?

**Earl Lerch:** Oh it was bur..., it was bad, we would be out on deck and they caught us, when the ship would go down and the waves would come up they had a 6 foot eve over, from the deck where the big gun was, and we just crawl under there, the water would go up over us, and they caught us and we got chewed out, but uh, you had abandon ship a couple times, I'd say, about 5 or 6 times on the way over, abandon ship, because we had subs come up that was following our convoy when we went over there.

**Interviewer:** So you could see them?

**Earl Lerch:** No, no we didn't see them, no.

**Interviewer:** They'd just tell you?

**Earl Lerch:** They'd tell us, or a warning would go off like you'd see in movies?

**Interviewer:** Hmm, hm.

**Earl Lerch:** An alarm goes off and everybody would have to put on their life jacket and get your gun, you didn't take nothing with you, because if it went down you didn't want nothing with you.

**Interviewer:** Well did they know, did anyone ever see one?

**Earl Lerch:** We never did.

**Interviewer:** Ok, how many ships were in your convoy?

**Earl Lerch:** I don't know, I couldn't tell you, I know, I know as far as you could see there was ships, now you going to show this to anybody else?

**Interviewer:** Well it could be, it's going to the Museum of Fort Campbell.

**Earl Lerch:** Well, I'll tell you this part, we had a field day and we had these binoculars, and we had one ship and it was probably a mile from us and it was women, all women, nurses and they walking around there with just a bra and pants on, and they would take turn charging people to use the binoculars.

**Interviewer:** To use the binoculars.

**Earl Lerch:** So we had a laugh on the way over.

**Interviewer:** That's pretty funny. So uh, from the long trip and that terrible trip, where did you land?

**Earl Lerch:** Lahave, France, we stopped in the English Channel and they were going to let us go in and they said no, they changed it so we stayed 3 days on ship in the English Channel and then we ended up in Lahave, France.

**Interviewer:** And uh, were you given orders before you got off the boat, what you were going to do or did you know you were just going to get off?

**Earl Lerch:** We were just going to get off and we were going to take our tanks and that we were going to go where we were going to go.

**Interviewer:** You were in the 13<sup>th</sup> Army Division, what else was with you, did you have some infantry with you?

**Earl Lerch:** Oh yeah we had, uh, it's all in there uh, well the 124<sup>th</sup>, and there was, there was a lot of infantry, and they liked us as long as they didn't bring big guns in, when the Germans used any aircraft, they used 101's on us, then you couldn't find an infantry man at all. He just disappeared because he knew he was going to get hurt.

**Interviewer:** Right, so you landed in France, and uh, you get your, are your orders to go as far into France as you can or do you have specific..?

**Earl Lerch:** No, we went one hour by train from Lahave, France to a little town, gahh, I should have read that up, I didn't know you were going to ask me all this.

**Interviewer:** Is it on this map here?

**Earl Lerch:** No, no we left Lahave, and we went up in here, that might, I can't make that out...

**Interviewer:** That says Jotes. J-O-T-E-S.

**Earl Lerch:** Well, there was a little, little place there with a few buildings and stuff and we stayed there for about a month, getting, they had to bring our tanks up because it took them 2 weeks to get our tanks and all our equipment of the boat up to where we were.

**Interviewer:** So were ya'll just kind of sitting around waiting or...?

**Earl Lerch:** More, No we weren't doing much, just trying to stay out of trouble.

**Interviewer:** Well, your tanks finally got there and uh, did you regroup and try...?

**Earl Lerch:** Then they, when we went to the closest train station, which is on here some place, and we went from here to Nancy, France, and we had to stand guard, we rode on the trains, standing and watching tanks, we had to stand outside on guard duty the whole time we were gone and it's January, cold, cold. And then when we got to Lahave, France, they unloaded all our tanks and everything and then we went from there, on a convoy.

**Interviewer:** From, where, where did they unload your tanks?

**Earl Lerch:** From Nancy, France.

**Interviewer:** So you didn't actually get in your tank until Nancy?

**Earl Lerch:** No, we didn't train on them at all. We just, they put them on the train, chained them down and then we had to stand guard, day and night, all through here until we hit Nancy, France.

**Interviewer:** Would you ride, I would assume you would ride the train and then when it stopped is when you would stand guard?

**Earl Lerch:** No, you were on guard all the time.

**Interviewer:** Really?

**Earl Lerch:** Yeah. You had to stand outside holding on and you were, guard duty all the time.

**Interviewer:** Now that is cold.

**Earl Lerch:** It is cold yeah. And, uh go ahead.

**Interviewer:** Oh, if you got something..

**Earl Lerch:** And uh, and we were riding this train, they called them 40 and 8. 40 men and 8 horses. They made bunks, where you slept on and it was straw, full of lice, I tell you, we caught lice, we had uh, they just crawl all over you.

**Interviewer:** Pretty much everyone on the train?

**Earl Lerch:** Everybody. And we had one Italian guy from New York, we shaved him, everybody taking turns shaving him, he had nothing but hair, to get rid of the lice, it was miserable, and uh..

**Interviewer:** I guess there was really nothing you could do about it?

**Earl Lerch:** No, no, they were in the straw and on the train.

**Interviewer:** Well, did they try to do anything for you anywhere.

**Earl Lerch:** No, there was nothing you could do. And some of the stuff, I don't know if I should tell you, but uh, when you were on this train that never stopped, when you had to go to the bathroom, you just hung out, hung on the side of the train and you pooped as your driving or you'd stand there and pee.

**Interviewer:** That is awful.

**Earl Lerch:** You didn't stop.

**Interviewer:** So how long did it take you to get from Lahave to...

**Earl Lerch:** I couldn't tell you, I couldn't tell you no more, it was 4 or 5 days.

**Interviewer:** That's a long way.

**Earl Lerch:** Yeah, it was a long ways.

**Interviewer:** And was sleeping at all, or I knew you were standing guard, did you get to take turns at all?

**Earl Lerch:** They'd change, when they'd stop every once in a while and you change guard. And uh, but most of the time you, out of that, all that time we were traveling, I'm trying to think of how long it'd taken us, but uh, most of the time you'd just sit in there and everybody had a deck of cards, everybody played, they gambled all the time. They gambled big money.

**Interviewer:** Actual money?

**Earl Lerch:** Money, actual money. Oh yeah, when we were going over on ship, they had classes on gambling, and what to look for because they had uh, gamblers enlist, and uh, they'd have so much money, that they would pay somebody to guard their money, 24 hours a day.

**Interviewer:** I can't believe anyone would have that much money.

**Earl Lerch:** Oh, yeah. Yeah, but by the time we got there, we were pretty happy because we stank. You know, you just, some of them get the runs, you would take your clothes off throw them away and put other clothes on.

**Interviewer:** And was this uh, when you got to Nancy, was this one of the places where you could go in the houses and did you find...?

**Earl Lerch:** No, no no, no. We didn't get to no houses or nothing there yet. That was later on after we got into battle.

**Interviewer:** Um, along this train route did you ever have anyone try to stop or attack or anything like that, the train?

**Earl Lerch:** No, no,, not when we were going up through there, we didn't get into battle until we got up in here, we had some shooting at us but...

**Interviewer:** Well, after you got to Nancy is when they unloaded the tanks...

**Earl Lerch:** And that's when we started running the tanks.

**Interviewer:** So how many miles a day we ya'll covering?

**Earl Lerch:** I couldn't tell you no more, you just went 24 hours, you went, we went, we had, well it was 3 weeks, before, before we got into battle but we were, there were paten job was to throw the Germans off, so they wouldn't know where we were going to strike.

**Interviewer:** So uh, from Nancy you went...

**Earl Lerch:** Up through here, I can't see it from here, all them little, there all German towns, maybe you can pronounce them, I can't.

**Interviewer:** I don't know about that. Nancy's pretty close to the German border, so you were going up so what, what did you go through after Nancy, did you uh, was it, was it a battle constantly or you just, kind of pushing your way?

**Earl Lerch:** For 3 weeks we just traveled, 24 hours a day, you'd stop, you'd stop in the morning, gas, oil, eat, and you had to, God, I don't think it was much over an hour, hour and a half, then we'd start again and you went like that there until evening. Then they stopped and you had to oil your tanks, gas them up and everything and then when that was over, then you started and you went all night long, until the next morning.

**Interviewer:** Did you have special mechanics and things that were with you or did ya'll learn how to do that in training?

**Earl Lerch:** Well no, they had, we had mechanics.

**Interviewer:** So their job was to take care of the tanks when you stopped for that?

**Earl Lerch:** Yeah, yeah, but we'd help. If we bust a track or something well, they'd be there and fix it.

**Interviewer:** Was it rare for them to break down?

**Earl Lerch:** No, they were new, they were pretty new, we didn't have much trouble in breaking down.

**Interviewer:** Ok um, well when did you get into your first armed battle when you were...?

**Earl Lerch:** I couldn't tell you.

**Interviewer:** Is it, was it, was it in Germany before you ever met in resistance?

**Earl Lerch:** Oh yeah, when Patton, they went across the Siegfried line, did you ever see pictures where they had big concrete...ok, well when they went through that, that's when we caught up with him, and we then followed after him and went through that and then we were...

**Interviewer:** So you met up with Patton and were with him?

**Earl Lerch:** Yeah, yeah. Before that we were just running back and forth, and he was with us but we didn't go into battle yet. He was just in charge of, he was our commander, and...

**Interviewer:** So what, what were your duties in a battle, were you in the back or did ya'll, were ya'll going forward first to try and bust everything up or...?

**Earl Lerch:** We were, whenever, every time you went you went in fives, and the German would always hit the middle one, then that way these stopped and then they'd shoot the back of the 5<sup>th</sup> one and by that time they could get us all, because at 3000 yards they could hit us, they could hit a 2 foot sign.

**Interviewer:** Were their tanks a lot bigger than yours?

**Earl Lerch:** Oh theirs a lot bigger and our tanks, ours, we had 75 millimeter guns and they'd bounce off a German tank because they were well, and there was only a couple spots where we'd shoot, if we could hit then right where the tracks, between the tracks, that's the only place we could stop them, until they come out with the 90 millimeter, then we could shoot...

**Interviewer:** So you felt kind of out-gunned?

**Earl Lerch:** Oh you could see, we could see, we'd stay here, the tank would be here, and you'd be up there at my son's house and you could watch the shells go through the air, they didn't go fast, they didn't shoot hard, they'd bounce off of German tanks.

**Interviewer:** And uh, I guess their, how big were their shots, have been?

**Earl Lerch:** Their 101 aircraft guns. They would go in one side and out the other. They were a powerful gun.

**Interviewer:** So um, so once again what was your, if, if ya'll ran upon a German tank, what, or the German army, what would, what would happen, were you chasing them most of the time?

**Earl Lerch:** We were chasing them most of the time, yeah. And we'd run up, where they'd pocket up and they'd wait on us. And at that time, it was getting towards the end of the war, we had more trouble with old men and 14 year old kids.

**Interviewer:** In the German towns and things?

**Earl Lerch:** Yeah, yeah. Because when we'd get out in the country, we'd run across some S.S. troops or some Germans and uh, but we couldn't, we couldn't with our 75 but when we got our 90 millimeters, then we could start shooting at them and we could knock them out, but before that the shells just bounce off.

**Interviewer:** So when you were going, it was almost full retreat mode they were in, the Germans?

**Earl Lerch:** Yeah, and if we get them in a pocket, they'd fight and then they'd give up and we'd go to the next town, we just, if we came to a town and there was kids, you never seen so many American flags, every time you'd come to a town, there would be an American flags, now if we'd come into a town, like Dixon, and they would in this side of town with a bunch of kids with an American flag, you're dead. They get you on the other end of their town and they'd, they'd just kill you. That's what's bad, but if you'd come into a town and nobody was there, then there wasn't, and Patton told us that uh, when you come to a town, stop, shoot a shell in town if they, throw a rock back, level it, cause they are going to kill you.

**Interviewer:** So that's what you did?

**Earl Lerch:** Yeah, that's what we do.

**Interviewer:** So when ya'll are going, ya'll are pushing into Germany, you had more, you had hardly any resistance from the German Army, it was more the citizens that were kind of...

**Earl Lerch:** No, no. there was just a couple towns, we had trouble.

**Interviewer:** Oh, just a couple.

**Earl Lerch:** Just a few towns and we had uh, 24<sup>th</sup> uh, Armory Division, and I was in C Company and D Company, they didn't listen. And when they went in they were just about all wiped out. The first day, went into battle because they didn't stop, and Patton, and I didn't see Patton but I was standing outside the door, you had to be a Sergeant or higher because we had no big place to meet so I a Corporal, I was a T-5, the Corporal with a T under it that meant you were a tank driver and uh, I, we listen to him and he told us what to do, exactly what to do, and uh, about 3 days later he came back, had another meeting and he cussed, he was rough and told us try to keep your life.

**Interviewer:** And you felt like that was...?

**Earl Lerch:** Yeah, we needed it. We need it because we knew we had to be scared.

**Interviewer:** Right, and you said a lot of people complained about how Patton handled things...

**Earl Lerch:** Civilians most are civilians you hear about, the ones we were over there with, they didn't complain. Because uh, he'd chew us out and we needed it.

**Interviewer:** Doing it for your best interest?

**Earl Lerch:** Yeah, yeah.

**Interviewer:** Ok, well you said you ended up in...?

**Earl Lerch:** Simbok we ended up, we went up through oh, we went into Belgium and down around, and we ended up in Simbok, Germany, it was on the Australian border.

**Interviewer:** Ok, was you're, was this plan, this line you have, was this the planned way to go or were you just following the Germans?

**Earl Lerch:** This was the planned way to go because they went so fast uh, where they would hit a pocket of Germans, they'd go around it and keep pushing and keep pushing, then we'd have to get in those pockets, and there would be a big pocket of them and then we'd have to go in there and take that over.

**Interviewer:** So you said they went around them, you're talking about Patton's men?

**Earl Lerch:** Yeah, all of us, I was with the 3<sup>rd</sup> Army at that time. But if uh, we had a lot of people, and when we come up, like if you hit Dixon and there would be a lot of antiaircraft guns and Germans there then they would kind of go around it, and then we'd come in and then that way they'd have to stay there and fight and we'd come in and have to take it over, and we got bloody, it got pretty bad sometimes.

**Interviewer:** Well, what do you, I know the battles probably stand out pretty well in your mind, what was it like being in, in those kind of things there?

**Earl Lerch:** Well uh, when I wasn't driving, I was assistant driver, whenever you would be going down the Autobahn, and whenever you come up where you had to stop, the assistant driver would have to get out and you'd run oh, 100 feet or so, I had because you didn't know what was coming, and at every bridge at all four corners there was a hole, and they'd tell you when you get out, you had to get up there and when you went to go in the hole, you shot, you take your machine gun and shoot because if there was anybody in there, you didn't want to hurt.

**Interviewer:** Right.

**Earl Lerch:** So that's why I say, he told us how to stay alive.

**Interviewer:** So how many, how many times do you think you ran upon the Germans in those pockets on your way, on your way to Simbok, was it, was it a lot or just very few?

**Earl Lerch:** No, there was quite a few. They had, we hit one packet, it was bad, they tore us up pretty bad. And uh, I was riding on the side, I wasn't driving that day, and we had a big guy named Blankenship, from West Virginia uh, and he had his own oil rigs, he drilled oil wells, so he's big in uh, and we were going down, and today everything is hydraulics, then there wasn't you pulled, I had to put my feet on the dash and pull with both hands, to a tank to turn, I was little, and uh, they told us when we stopped that night, they said you're lucky Lerch and I said why, they said 3 times they missed your tank by 1 foot. That when they had those big bazookas, the Germans, bazookas when they hit, the bazooka would hit and stick and it was so many seconds, as soon as it hit, it ignited and stuck and then it was so many seconds and then it would blow up and blow a hole and kill you. So...

**Interviewer:** So I guess you couldn't see a lot of that with the way...?

**Earl Lerch:** No, you didn't see, you didn't see...

**Interviewer:** ...the way you were driving the tank?

**Earl Lerch:** No, you were just looking ahead, shooting at anything if something moved, I was assistant driver at that time, I had a 30 caliber machine gun so as your going down the road if something moves, you shot it. You didn't know what it was you just shot at it.

**Interviewer:** Just part of staying alive.

**Earl Lerch:** That's it. Yeah.

**Interviewer:** Cause you never knew. Well, as you were getting closer to Simbok uh, did things get, was it getting easier?

**Earl Lerch:** It was getting easier, yes. Course then, by that time, the Germans surrendered in May, and uh we didn't, we was getting in the later part of May. So then we went a couple days into Simbok, then we stayed there a month,

**Interviewer:** In Simbok, a month?

**Earl Lerch:** Yeah.

**Interviewer:** Were you kind of, just uh, waiting for new orders or..?

**Earl Lerch:** We were uh, on guard duty and every time you stopped you looked for S.S. troops because they threw the uniforms away and wanted to get out, so we were looking for S.S. troops, and every cross road, they'd, we'd be 6 or 8 of us out there stopping, there riding bicycles or cars and...

**Interviewer:** Did you have problems with the language?

**Earl Lerch:** Yeah.

**Interviewer:** I guess it's not really any way around that though.

**Earl Lerch:** They gave us a book, we knew some words, where we had some, we met some people, we would use the words.

**Interviewer:** So what do you remember about, how did you hear about the Germans surrendering?

**Earl Lerch:** It was uh, I think it was 3 or 4 days after they surrendered before we heard about it.

**Interviewer:** Oh really?

**Earl Lerch:** Yeah we didn't know nothing about it.

**Interviewer:** Was your commander or...?

**Earl Lerch:** Nobody, we didn't know, nobody heard, and then we stopped one day and they said ok the Germans, the war is over, the Germans surrendered, but it was already over a couple days.

**Interviewer:** Well, I guess ya'll felt pretty...

**Earl Lerch:** Yeah, we felt good then. Then we stayed in Simbok, Germany and uh, we had uh, head across the border and hit a wine cellar and start drinking wine.

**Interviewer:** Got to celebrate.

**Earl Lerch:** We were.

**Interviewer:** And uh, so what were, you stayed there a month and then what happened?

**Earl Lerch:** Then they told us ok, were going back to the states. And on the way back, they load us up and everything on trains and...

**Interviewer:** Did you have to go all the way into France, to the U.S. Channel?

**Earl Lerch:** Yeah, we had to go back into Lahave, France and they were going to give us uh, 3 days to go to Paris, we were, well, we were tickled to death, and uh, everybody was going to get a pass to go to Paris in the morning, and then that night we get up the next morning and they said ah that's canceled were heading to the states, so we didn't get to go to Paris, France.

**Interviewer:** I imagine a lot of disappointed people.

**Earl Lerch:** Yeah, yeah.

**Interviewer:** So you got back to Lahave and you went...

**Earl Lerch:** And then we hit the, let's see when did the Japanese surrender, they surrendered in July, so...

**Interviewer:** It was later, it was August, because we dropped the bombs in early August.

**Earl Lerch:** Ok, but uh, I was uh, I was home for 30 days, they gave everyone, when you hit the states, everybody, gave them a pass to go to your home town, you had 30 days and then we had to meet and uh, it's Brandenburg Air Force Base, in California now, we had to meet there.

**Interviewer:** I guess they gave you all train transportation?

**Earl Lerch:** Yeah, they gave us tickets and everything and we had to meet there in 30 days.

**Interviewer:** And what, what was going on there that you had to...?

**Earl Lerch:** They were getting, well, what they, that was where we were suppose to meet and then they were going to put us on LSD's and we were suppose to go across the Pacific and hit Japan. But they surrendered while we were home in that 30 days.

**Interviewer:** And had ya'll, did you do any further training for the Japanese?

**Earl Lerch:** Well, they do something then that they don't do today much, uh, we had to go through training uh, that was in uh, we were, I stayed in California for about 3 months and then we went to Fort Hood, Texas, and they kind of debrief you, they didn't leave you, you don't go home like they do today, and this is where uh, soldiers kill their wives and you know they uh, because we had some that are shell shocked, I mean you'd go like this here, (claps his hands), he'd kill you. So they kind of, you'd go, had the classes and training and uh, and stuff before you discharged.

**Interviewer:** Wow, did uh, so you're debriefed and is that when or did you have any more training on the tanks after the debriefing for the Japanese Invasion?

**Earl Lerch:** No, after we went to Fort Hood, Texas, then they was just more or less going to classes and stuff like that.

**Interviewer:** And they just told you what they were planning on doing?

**Earl Lerch:** Yeah, that's what we heard, well when we met out in California, everybody had to be there in 30 days and then we had some classes and they showed us some maps and I wish I had some, I can't find it, and told us where we were going to invade, how many, if Truman wouldn't have dropped the Atomic bomb, there'd have been a million American soldiers killed.

**Interviewer:** I guess, I guess ya'll knew, did they tell you how, how risky this operation was going to be and how...?

**Earl Lerch:** Yeah, yeah. They showed , I wish I could find it, on the paper, where we were going to invade, and where the marine were going to come in after us, and like Tokyo was here, we was going to go in here and some were going to come up through here, but it was going to be a big deal.

**Interviewer:** Well, how did it, all you're the people in the 13<sup>th</sup>, how did they feel, how did you feel about, when you heard about all this?

**Earl Lerch:** We were scared. That was worse than going over in Europe because everybody heard about the Japanese, the death marches and how cruel they were, they were different, they were crueler than the German were.

**Interviewer:** And uh, so I guess everyone was kind of uneasy knowing, because didn't you say your commander told you can only be alive for like 20 minutes, your best?

**Earl Lerch:** We'd have only lived 20 minutes, after we, if we'd have got on the beach, 20 minutes.

**Interviewer:** So where were you, here or in Texas, when you heard about the Atomic Bomb being dropped?

**Earl Lerch:** I was, we were in the United States then,

**Interviewer:** I mean were you in Texas or were you in California?

**Earl Lerch:** California.

**Interviewer:** You were in California?

**Earl Lerch:** Yeah, after we went Texas, Europe, then we came back and went to California.

**Interviewer:** I guess when you heard that, was everyone, were you starting to feel like you might not have to?

**Earl Lerch:** Well, they told us that's the reason we're not going to go, we're going to get discharged now, because the Japs' surrendered, they dropped the atomic bombs.

**Interviewer:** Well, so um, so you got discharged in 45' or did they wait until 46'?

**Earl Lerch:** April 46'.

**Interviewer:** And you went back, you went straight back to Pennsylvania?

**Earl Lerch:** I went, yeah, I had to go back to uh, I read all that last night and can't remember, and I started to get the paperwork out and I forgot to.

**Interviewer:** What did they have you doing between August of 45' and April 46'?

**Earl Lerch:** Just going to classes, we didn't do no training, very little, we had to get out and do some cal esthetics but then it was just uh, it was over.

**Interviewer:** So you just uh, waiting around for whenever they decided to discharge you?

**Earl Lerch:** Yeah, till we get discharged yeah.

**Interviewer:** And uh, so in retrospect, looking back you felt, after you got trained, that you were very well prepared, after going through war and being over there did you feel like you training was still suffice, you felt like it prepared you for everything you saw?

**Earl Lerch:** Yeah, it uh , they told us that uh, we had always heard that Japanese were little people, well we found out that all of them over there, were 6 foot tall or taller that we were going to fight. So that kind of scared us too, and they told us too before we went to Germany, that uh, that all the German shells would go through an American tank, well that kind of scared us, because we knew if one of the guns hit us that was it.

**Interviewer:** So just a lot of maybe just uneasiness going on?

**Earl Lerch:** It was. And uh, I got into trouble one time, and so we had a guy, 90 day wonder, and those are the ones that go 90 days and come out as a second Lieutenant and they'd think they controlled the world. And uh, I got in trouble because I popped off, and whenever the D Company, when they got slaughtered, why they'd say Lerch go in that tank and pull, had to pull tanks out of ditches, had to pull them off the roads so we could go. And there's nothing rottener then the smell of burnt flesh, and it was weird, it was creepy getting in a tank.

**Interviewer:** Well, um, how did you feel about the leadership of, like your own, the leader of the 13<sup>th</sup> Army, of Patton and all them did you feel...?

**Earl Lerch:** Yeah, Yeah we did. We had a good general, and officers that talked to you all the time and uh, if you went out and uh, you did a lot of marching discipline, and if you got out of step, and we had some guys from West Virginia and those places that were back in the woods and boot leg country, that we'd take a normal step, we'll they'd take, they have a long leg so they would take, everybody stepping on each other's heels and finally they raised gate and we had a sergeant and he'd cuss us out and but we found out he was the nicest one of the bunch, but he tore us up, cuss us out, tell us off, but he, they got us in shape so we, you get out there and you have to see black soldiers march, I mean they'd do everything to perfection, Well they tried to do that to us, because their pride is in marching, so we'd see them and that's how we had to be so we worked.

**Interviewer:** But you always felt that they were looking out for your best interest or...?

**Earl Lerch:** Yeah, yeah.

**Interviewer:** And were they always accessible to you, you could always talk to them?

**Earl Lerch:** Yeah, we could always talk to them. Yeah, our company commander said anytime you want to come in and talk to me go ahead and talk to him.

**Interviewer:** You said you really respected Patton for the way he always tried to keep you safe.

**Earl Lerch:** Yeah, yeah. He said I'm going to teach you how to stay alive. So that's what...

**Interviewer:** Did you feel, were you aware of a lot of the things going on with Roosevelt and Churchill, and all that?

**Earl Lerch:** No. none of that, none of that.

**Interviewer:** And how well informed did they keep you about everything else happening, I guess not very because...

**Earl Lerch:** They didn't keep us, we didn't know, the only thing we looked for the next morning was where we were going to go fight somebody, we were going to look for Germans.

**Interviewer:** You just knew the next morning what you were doing and ...

**Earl Lerch:** That's it. That's all we knew.

**Interviewer:** And did you feel, did you like that, only knowing or did you want to know...

**Earl Lerch:** We didn't want to know, we were just, we had shell shock, we, they ran us, Germans ran us off the Autobahn one night, one afternoon, so, you just went and found a tree or you went out her and go to crap and a shell would land oh down the road a piece, you just pull up your pants and run like hell.

**Interviewer:** Well, I guess over your whole experience, did you feel like this was a good time , I mean I know it probably wasn't fun, but you felt like this was a ...

**Earl Lerch:** It was educational.

**Interviewer:** Yeah, a good experience?

**Earl Lerch:** A good experience, yeah, it was.

**Interviewer:** And you always felt, you were proud to fight?

**Earl Lerch:** Yeah, I was, I was.

**Interviewer:** You weren't, you didn't mind, because you wanted to enlist, you didn't mind being drafted.

**Earl Lerch:** Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

**Interviewer:** Well, looking back do you wish you could have been in the Navy or were you fine...

**Earl Lerch:** No, I was fine, I met a lot of good guys in the Army, and uh, I actually uh, when it was over we went through uh, what was Hitler's uh, his mountain retreat...

**Interviewer:** The Crow's Nest?

**Earl Lerch:** Yeah, we went up there.

**Interviewer:** Oh really?

**Earl Lerch:** They wouldn't allow us to drive, we had to walk.

**Interviewer:** Long of a walk?

**Earl Lerch:** It was a long walk, up there, but the carpet was thick, drapes, everything was beautiful, there was 11 stories in this mountain where an elevator shaft, we walked to the top because they , everything was booby trapped, so they had to get, they got in there and looked for booby traps to keep from blowing up so we didn't get to see none of that, but seen Birches Gardens, yeah , it was something to see, we met the 101 from Fort Campbell, they were over there.

**Interviewer:** Yeah there's a lot...

**Earl Lerch:** Yeah, they were a little rotten, they were too, they gave us a hard time.

**Interviewer:** So do you have anything else you'd like to add about?

**Earl Lerch:** Uh, I don't know of anything.

**Interviewer:** Well, I guess that's it.