

>> Interviewer: Claude, please tell us your full name.

>> Hipp: My full name is Claude Johnson Hipp.

>> Interviewer: Where were you born?

>> Hipp: Born in a small hamlet called Cross Hill, South Carolina.

>> Interviewer: At what date were you born?

>> Hipp: Born in 1923.

>> Interviewer: Tell us just a little bit about your family life back then, before you got into the army.

>> Hipp: Well, before I joined the army, I attended high school in Greenwood, South Carolina, and then went to Clemson -- we called it "College" in those days. Now it's called Clemson University.

At the end of our junior year, we volunteered to go in the active service, and the government very obligingly let us in to be privates in certain different armed forces. I was assigned to the infantry, and in a short period of time, we were sent to Officer Candidate School and graduated in the summer of 1944.

>> Interviewer: So that was between '42 and '43?

>> Hipp: In college between '40 and '43 and in the army until that time, at which time, on graduation from Officer Candidate School, we were assigned to our infantry divisions, and I was

assigned to the 89th infantry at Fort Butner, North Carolina. And then subsequently, our division was sent overseas to France.

>> Interviewer: And when was that? Was that at the beginning of the war?

>> Hipp: That was well along during the war, and we were shipped overseas in January of 1944.

>> Interviewer: '44, I'm sorry. What happened then? Where were you shipped first? What area? What town?

>> Hipp: We were shipped on cargo carriers, and our division was landed in the port of Le Havre, which had been captured, and it had been made safe, and this was in the winter, the worst winter I believe Europe had had in quite a number of decades. We were sent to a camping area, where we were in small tents in the snow for several weeks until all of our division arrived with our equipment, and then we were sent into action. The 89th infantry, at that time, was a new division, not having been in combat, and we were rushed, right after the Bulge, to an area called Trier in Luxembourg, and we were first committed in the Moselle Valley against the Germans.

>> Interviewer: About when was that?

>> Hipp: That was about the first of March in that year. We were combat-ready. We had felt that, due to the French climate and the wintertime, we were thoroughly accustomed to Europe in the winter by then. So we were committed into the Moselle Valley to sweep out the Germans from that area. They were thoroughly entrenched, and our division was put to work then.

>> Interviewer: After that?

>> Hipp: After that, we were thoroughly -- the generals were thoroughly satisfied with our initial engagement in the Moselle Valley and clearing of Germans in that area. And then we were sent to the Rhine River, where we were one of the first in our army to have crossed the Rhine River, early one morning before dawn. And we, having arrived at the real heart of Germany, we continued to mop up the Germans and fight them as we went, as we thought we were going to Berlin. Of course we never arrived due to being held back by our army and the desire for the Russians to take Berlin, but we were well on the way through there.

>> Interviewer: Do you remember some of the towns in that area?

>> Hipp: Yes, I do. It's been hard to believe, 46 years since we were involved in combat there, but I do remember the small hamlets, the larger towns, and some of the giant towns that we went through.

We mainly were combat troops and were assigned to units of what's called an armored division. In those days, we were in the Third Army, going through Germany, and General Patton believed in armor as well as connecting with infantry, and we were formed into combat teams, a certain number of infantrymen in our battalion along with maybe a platoon of tanks, and we were to march as fast and as far as we could to seize the initiative from the Germans, rather than being a constant, sort of a static type affair. And this was most successful, and we moved for hundreds of miles in a very short while and allowed troops behind us, the infantry, to mop up areas that we couldn't bust up, you might say. But it was a fast, fast, vigorous way of taking enemy ground, and it was very successful.

>> Interviewer: Did you have the opportunity to see many of the natives in the area or talk to them?

>> Hipp: The natives at that time -- the Germans, as we knew them then -- were extremely fearful of any American. They were totally humble. They'd lost their arrogance suddenly when they were occupied in their towns, and their units, we captured thousands and thousands of German soldiers, quite docile when apprehended. They were a very kind -- sort of a kind of people that kowtowed to authority. And once the American army moved in, they were readily assimilated into what we used call "good Germans" in a hurry, you know.

Generally, our contact with Germans, at that time in combat, was limited to taking of prisoners and assigning civilians certain areas that they must go to during the taking of a town or certain activities that we had to undergo involving supplies and ammunition. They stayed out of the way most of the time. They ran and hid, and as a result, our contact was very, very limited.

We did notice, in their homes and in their villages, an extreme plenty of everything. We hadn't seen the French homes too much when we had been billeted there before combat. But we were impressed with the lavish farms and all of the foodstuffs. Sausages, meats, eggs, things that the rest of Europe didn't have, these Germans seemed to have in great abundance. And their homes that we billeted in were waxing fat with the finest of possessions, furniture, rugs, tapestries, and the like. The Germans seemed to be high on the hog in those days as we went through and continued to occupy each town.

We got to know Germans later after the war, and during the period of time that we were involved in combat, there was a nonfraternization rule that we were not to mingle and deal with the German people. This was later relaxed after the war, after a period of time. But we really didn't get to know them until later.

>> Interviewer: At that point, your unit was going through west -- towards the south of Germany, or in that general area?

>> Hipp: Well, toward the center of Germany.

>> Interviewer: Center of Germany.

>> Hipp: We call it central, Central Europe, and it was the area through Wiesbaden and straight on through until you reach -- continuously until you reach a town called Erfurt. Erfurt was a highly industrialized center. And in route to our final destination, where we were finally held up until the Russians were permitted to move in to Berlin, we encountered some very, very horrible sights, and I'd like to tell you about those.

>> Interviewer: Please do.

>> Hipp: In the first week of April that year, we were moving hurriedly, as I mentioned, in a combat team in our division through an area that none of us know, or knew of, and still don't really know, except it was near a large German town called Gotha. And as our division moved forward, one of our regiments stumbled into one of the greatest sores, scabs in Europe that you can imagine, and it was a work camp that had been run by the German SS outside a small town called Ohrdruf. This camp, we found out later, was called Stalag Nord-Ohrdruf. And it was 2 or 3 miles from one of Germany's largest officer candidate schools that they had just closed down in December and only 2 or 3 miles from one of the largest munitions plants, even though this was a small town.

The Germans had used hundreds and hundreds of workers that had been drafted as slave labor from all over Europe, particularly Eastern Europe -- Poland, Latvia, quite a number of Russians -- and even, we found later, an American flier, who had been shot down and had been enclosed in this work prison. The workers were

forced to work in a munitions plant, and they were held in a compound that was wired in, about a couple of acres in size.

And when our unit went in, we found this compound completely filled with hundreds of dead bodies. It was a sight I'd never seen before and hope to never see again in my life. It impressed me so greatly that I care enough to tell you about it now. Otherwise, I would rather be quiet because it brings a lot of sadness to me to know what man can do to man. I took an English course under Professor John Lane at Clemson, and I remember he used to talk about man's inhumanity to man, with poems and things of that sort, and I never really realized what it meant until I found this area and we marched through the camp Ohrdruf.

It's hard to describe different bodies that are lying on top of each other. It's hard to describe the railroad ties that had been set up. The way we were told that it happened were by broken English from a couple of the camp guards that had been prisoners themselves. I guess in today's prison we would call 'em a trustee, except that I sometimes wondered, as I saw how fat and well-fed they were, just whose side they were really on. They did describe to those in broken English that the camp had been run for supplying labor to the munitions plant and that these workers, numbering in several hundreds, were extremely poorly fed.

I have a picture here that came with some of my belongings back from overseas that I really didn't want to keep, but I'm glad it was retained so that I could remember what man's hate can do to man. These are some of the bodies that we saw in Ohrdruf. The workers -- many, many hundreds -- had been starved over a period of time, or they were taken by disease. And these trustees were describing that, over the last two years, that when these poor people, these poor slave workers, were to die, they would be taken to a big area behind the concentration area and buried in a hole. It was estimated -- we'll never know -- that there were

about 9,000 workers that had been placed and bulldozed, ground over to cover 'em up. And the SS, *Schutzstaffel*, corps assigned to guarding this camp had heard that the Americans were moving fast in, and they had recently buried several hundred of these poor people that had been whipped or beaten or starved, and they forced some of the other laborers to dig them up and bring 'em out and put 'em on these railroad ties so that their bodies could be burned and the evidence destroyed. I think I held up this picture here. This is one of those groups of railroad ties and what bodies were remaining there when we were asked to view this camp.

I can't tell you what a human body that's decomposed smells like. It's indescribable. But the scent of those bodies -- for, I'd say, hundreds of yards before we reached the camp -- were in the air, and it took us days after walking through there to get the aroma out of our uniforms. It sticks with you, and without being sacrilegious, I'd like to say this, that, even today, I don't enjoy barbecuing in the backyard.

They had a whipping shed in this camp, where I guess 40 or 50 bodies were stacked like cordwood. And the trustee, the fat worker trustee, said that it was normal to put a body of anyone who hadn't minded or had broken the camp rules into sort of a shackle and lean them over a table and strap them with a heavy cane or a whip. I believe he mentioned 115 times. That number sticks in my mind. And then if they were able to last through, they were put back to work the next day. If they didn't make it, then, of course, they were buried behind the camp.

Based on what we saw -- now, this was not what's called a concentration camp, for purposed extermination. This was a work camp, and I can't help but think, if this was a work camp and things like this occurred, what in the world would a concentration camp have been? We left this camp and went back into the lines again, reformed, and moved on ahead, and I can

remember right now that that evening we were out on detail and guarding a unit at night before we advanced the next day, and I can remember seeing the German moon and wondering what in the world can make a man, or men or people, do this to other people?

So that's my experience in seeing Ohrdruf. I was told this later, after we left, that it was such an extreme sight -- and, obviously, this must have been one of the first camps Americans had taken -- that, the day following, that General Eisenhower, who was our general in charge of the European operations, and General Bradley and our Third Army general, General George S. Patton, flew in, and they viewed this camp. And I've read also that General Patton, whom we all called "Old Blood and Guts," saw this sight, and, unlike his reputation, he went out later and threw up repeatedly. He had never seen such a sight like that before.

So that's my experience in Ohrdruf, and I just -- I find it sad to even remember. But I guess what we want to do is to make sure that this doesn't happen again.

>> Interviewer: One of your ways to remember is to have these pictures. Do you have others?

>> Hipp: No, these are the only pictures, except my squad sergeant, when we went through Ohrdruf, took pictures, and he had duplicates made later on, at the termination of hostilities, and gave me one of each. There must have been 10 or 15. And as we were later billeted in a German home, one of the German families rifled through our personal possessions and took all of those pictures.

The average German told me, the few that I could mention it to later after the war, that they didn't know anything about it. When Ohrdruf was taken, the unit commander went to this small town of Ohrdruf and invited the mayor and his wife -- they call

them Bürgermeister -- and his wife to view this and make some accounting of the fact that how could you be mayor of a town and have this going on right outside. And we never knew the particular reason for it, but that night, the Bürgermeister and his wife both committed suicide. That was the guilt that they felt. And a lot of other Germans felt the guilt then, but mostly they don't like to talk about it.

And I'm finding today, in today's world -- I'm beginning to read articles and newspapers and magazines that might indicate that things weren't quite that bad over there, that they really were just misunderstood people, and that those things really didn't happen and some of us who say they did are liars, and I resent that bitterly because they did happen, and they happened to thousands and thousands and thousands of people, and this is a message that I'd like to say that I'll repeat as long as I'm around, you know. I was just 21 years old then, and as you can see, I'm no longer 21, but as long as I'm around, I'll speak up, and we don't want this to happen again.

>> Interviewer: Is there anything else you'd like to add that you might have thought about, like any context with any Germans when you were billeted after Ohrdruf or prior to?

>> Hipp: My contact with Germans after the hostilities was very, very limited. We were shipped after the cessation of the war back to France to reprocess the shipment of people back to -- of Americans back to this country. And then I was reassigned to Vienna on General Mark Clark's staff there -- as a very junior officer, I might add -- but there, the Austrians, who are German, professed that, really, it wasn't their fault, that they were really Austrians and they didn't have anything to do with it, even though they had as many in the German army as the Germans did. They chose not to speak, and I think that's our danger today: people are afraid to speak for right and justice and honor.

>> Interviewer: Thank you, Claude.

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