

Transcript:

John Lassing

J29

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Interviewer: John Lassing. It's May 20, 1990. We're at the Jewish Temple. John—for the record, for the tape—what is your full name?

John Lassing: John Morris Lassing Jr.

Interviewer: And what is your address?

John Lassing: 116 Laird Road.

Interviewer: Your telephone number is 352-6371.

John Lassing: Yes, it is.

Interviewer: Your birth date?

John Lassing: April 24, 1925.

Interviewer: You and your wife and all of your children have all been born in Nashville?

John Lassing: In Davidson County. Yes.

Interviewer: And your parents ahead of you?

John Lassing: Yes.

Interviewer: Your ethnic background?

John Lassing: Scots-Irish.

Interviewer: A little bit of [German]...

John Lassing: Methodist. A little bit of German, Methodist.

Interviewer: What was your father's occupation?

John Lassing: He was an oil distributor.

Interviewer: And your mother?

John Lassing: Housewife.

Interviewer: What did you do before 1941?

John Lassing: Student.

Interviewer: You were born in 1925, you said, in Nashville and so you were a student. Do you remember what grade you were when the war broke out?

John Lassing: Yeah. Very well I remember when they bombed Pearl Harbor. I was a senior at the Columbia Military Academy.

Interviewer: So that was a prep school down in Columbia, Tennessee.

John Lassing: Hmm-hmm. Forty-three miles south of Nashville.

Interviewer: You were getting a kind of military training?

John Lassing: Yes. My father had believed that we might get in the war with—that England was already involved in. He thought that it'd be best for me to go to ROTC Military School and get training and then maybe when the war did come I would be able to get a commission, which didn't pan out but that's not a problem.

Interviewer: Now you must be like me. I was in Georgia and we only had 11 grades then. Was that true then? Did you have 11 or 12?

John Lassing: We had 12.

Interviewer: You did?

John Lassing: But I had made up one early in my school career.

Interviewer: So you were graduating...

John Lassing: So I was going to—well, I did graduate after Pearl Harbor in June. Pearl Harbor was in December. I graduated the following June.

Interviewer: So you were 17?

John Lassing: Right.

Interviewer: When did you join the Army?

John Lassing: The next year. I came home and worked in my dad's plant and we had the draft and I volunteered to be drafted early.

Interviewer: Well, now, would you clarify that a little bit? You volunteered rather than were actually called out?

John Lassing: Right. We knew that some of us were going to be drafted, let's say, in September and we thought—a friend of mine and I thought—we might get a little bit ahead of the hound if we went on and went to the draft board and said, "Take us now and let us get our chance to do what some of the things we want to do."

Interviewer: Where were you sent for training?

John Lassing: Well, yes, I went to—was inducted in the Army at Fort Oglethorpe which is a town next to Chattanooga. Came back home for nine days and went from here to Hattiesburg, Mississippi, Camp Shelby, for basic training. I had my basic training at Camp Shelby. Then I left there and went to Augusta, Georgia. It's now called Fort Gordon. Then, it was Camp Gordon. It was a real experience for an 18-year-old because I had turned 18 in April when I was asked to go over there. It was something that I had not counted on. But I thought it was going to work out because I had applied for, during my induction, to go into the program at Georgia Tech, which the Army had programs there that would put you in Engineering school and things like that, you know, professional-type things. I had taken the test and passed it. I had the grade and never got there.

Interviewer: So what did they assign you at...?

John Lassing: They then assigned me to Fort Bragg, North Carolina. Gave me a ten-day furlough and sent me to Camp Gilmore, New Jersey to go to Europe.

Interviewer: Well, now, at Fort Gordon—going by Camp Gordon then—what were you being trained there to do?

John Lassing: Be cannon fodder. That sounds bad, doesn't it?

Interviewer: As an infantry...?

John Lassing: Infantryman, yes. When they transferred me to Fort Bragg, they gave me some medical training. Let me learn how to shoot an orange with a syringe and needle and let me learn several things like that. I didn't know why at that time. We went up and got on the boat. Went over to England and I got some more of it over there.

Interviewer: Some more medical training?

John Lassing: Medical training. Then when we finally did go to Europe, I was a medic.

Interviewer: Okay. Now what Army were you a part of?

John Lassing: Well, you got to understand that there wasn't any necessary—"You're in here or here or here." It wasn't solidified like I thought it was going to be. I was in the 79th Infantry Division when I went overseas. When I went to the coast, I was still in it. But two days on the coast and I was detached from it and attached to the 2nd Armored Division because the tanks were on the coast by that time and they were moving so fast that infantry people couldn't keep up with them. Infantry's trying to walk and they're moving and there's no way you could keep up. That's where I got on the coast.

Interviewer: Which coast? On...

John Lassing: Omaha Beach.

Interviewer: Uh-huh. So you're talking about after D-Day.

John Lassing: Well, I'm talking about late—sometime after 1:00 D-Day. I waited out. The Navy told us they were going to run us up on the beach and drop the thing. We'd run out on the sand. Well, they dropped the thing all right but the water was about shoulder high on me when we went out. And it was interesting. They were shooting at us and we had—and I pulled a boy out of the ocean as I went up on the beach.

Interviewer: You got...

John Lassing: I don't know who he was but I pulled him.

Interviewer: So you went in to France on June 6, 1944 and what?

John Lassing: The sixth or seventh wave...

Interviewer: And you went in as a part of an infantry unit?

John Lassing: 79th.

Interviewer: But then after, on the coast, you were assigned to the 2nd Armored?

John Lassing: When Betty and I went back to Europe in 1985, there's a little fenced cemetery on Omaha Beach. I carried the first casualty that I had or that I picked up to that cemetery for burial. That was late in the afternoon, almost dark of D-Day. Then we went on from there. From the time we got—of course, you know Omaha was solid cliffs. By the time we got up on top of the cliff, it was dark. We started going and they fired the tanks up the next morning and we started moving this—we had orders: anything that pops up, shoot it. Of course, I didn't even have a gun, so it didn't really [unintelligible]...

Interviewer: Why didn't you have a gun?

John Lassing: Medics were not allowed to carry any guns.

Interviewer: Now you mentioned getting medical training, when were you formally assigned to be a medic, John? When did that happen?

John Lassing: I guess I was formally known as a medic in March of '44 before we went to France in June. I had a couple of months of: what do you do with this man's leg, got a hole in it, hit your head? How do you patch it? How do you—you sprinkle sulfur in it, sure, but how do you do it? How do you bandage it? How do you give him help to get back? On the beach, we didn't have time for that. On the beach, we pulled them up and got them out of the water. The LCI Navy people came in and picked them up and carried them back to England.

Interviewer: So that's what you met when you said you saved somebody...

John Lassing: Yes, I just pulled him on out of the water, up on the beach.

Interviewer: You were working as a combat medic?

John Lassing: Well, I don't know whether I ever got the official designation "combat medic" like they did with the combat infantryman but that's basically what I did.

Interviewer: And so when you joined the Armored unit?

John Lassing: Same thing.

Interviewer: The same thing.

John Lassing: Same thing. The only thing the Armored unit did for me, it gave me a partner to help and gave me a jeep to keep up.

Interviewer: So now would you tell us then about what the next months were like this from, say, June of '44 through the rest of that year?

John Lassing: Yes. I'd be glad too. Because there really wasn't—there were some pockets of fighting and there were some injuries and some trouble but there really wasn't what I'd call a "pitch battle." We'd have skirmishes and we'd have—well, at the Hürtgen Forest, we had a pretty good battle. That's the one I remember most.

Interviewer: Now which direction...?

John Lassing: We were moving east towards Germany.

Interviewer: Okay.

John Lassing: And the Hürtgen Forest is east of Paris. It's around Épinal and Nancy, France. And what they did was they pulled the 2nd Armored out of the line, we'd been in since D-Day. They pulled it out of the line and sent the 100th Infantry Division in. They got cut up pretty bad. They were green and they got cut up pretty bad. After that, why, we went back in to the lines and never came out until it was all over. We didn't—well, I'd say from the time we crossed the Rhine River—and I crossed the Rhine River at Mannheim—I'd say from the time we crossed the Rhine River, it was a pretty foregone conclusion of—I mean, are we going to take prisoners and how many are we going to kill, basically. They had lost all their zeal for fighting. That's the Wehrmacht. That was the German Army now. You had some fanatical "black boots," I call them that were like the SS troopers. And they didn't want give up, period. We had pockets of them that had to be worked out. But there was not any real—we had not really seen anything until I got to Dachau and that's when it all hit the fan.

Interviewer: When did you cross the Rhine? Do you remember other major cities along the way or anything?

John Lassing: Well, of course—no, let me say that I remember us going through some good cities. You said you had been over there. You said you had been to the cathedral. Do you remember that cathedral at Chartres, France?

Interviewer: Oh, yes.

John Lassing: We went through and took Chartres. That is one I remember. We came up to Versailles and stopped under the pretext of letting General de Gaulle take his capital city. He couldn't do it. We had to go on to Paris and we—well, actually, I wasn't the first one in. None of us were first because they put enough in there to go in to really scoop it up. And then after we left Paris, Fontainebleau, and Nancy, and Épinal and—what is the Baccarat? Is that where the crystal comes from?

Interviewer: Hmm-hmm.

John Lassing: We took that. And they're just some of the French towns—Strasbourg—I was in Strasbourg. Then they pulled us out and sent us up north across the Rhine. We crossed the Rhine at Mannheim on an Army Engineer bridge because the Germans blew everything that was on the Rhine. They didn't want us in Germany, you know, so they blew those bridges. We had some good engineering battalions and they fixed us up with bridges that we could cross. It's funny to see a pontoon bridge. You see a 28-ton tank get on that bank and running downhill to the middle of the river and then on uphill to get out because the bridge gives with all that weight. But it worked. We didn't have any losses there and it worked. We took Mannheim and went to Heidelberg. There's a big university at Heidelberg. We went there. Then we started south-southeast from Heidelberg and went to try to go and come in to Munich from a different angle that the Germans thought we would be doing. We were successful in that. Only trouble was that I never got to Munich.

Interviewer: Okay. Now, in all this, did you see a lot of combat? Did you work as a medic?

John Lassing: Yes. I worked as a medic. Yes.

Interviewer: Had you seen horrible things all along?

John Lassing: Well, yes. Yes. Louis [unintelligible 0:16:33], my partner, and I picked up a man that had both legs and both arms blown off. I'd say that was pretty horrible. I laid on the stretcher in a collecting company and pumped my blood out of my left arm into his to try to save him. No way. He was way too far gone. The shock was too great. He couldn't do it. But that's bad. But you understand that that man was there of his own volition trying to do a job to make this country free and he gave it his all. There's no more. Later on, some of the people I saw were not there of their own volition.

Interviewer: All right. But you were a battle-hardened vet?

John Lassing: I'd say as hard as you could get from battle. Yes.

Interviewer: Okay. So you wouldn't describe yourself as "tender" at that point? You'd seen a lot?

John Lassing: Yes, I have. No, I was not tender. I was not tender three hours off of the beach. It just doesn't work that way. If you believe in your country and you believe in freedom, you get hard.

Interviewer: But nothing had prepared you for Dachau?

John Lassing: Oh, no. Nothing. Nothing on earth. There were four of us in this room that are normally healthy, wholehearted individual. There were thousands of them who had been decimated to nothing. Yet, they had that look out of their eye—"I want to be free." Sorry...

Interviewer: At the Battle of the Bulge, [unintelligible]?

John Lassing: Well, that was before I got into Germany.

Interviewer: All right. This is John Lassing interview, segment two. It's May 20, 1990. John, we're going through the Second World War now. I asked you if you were a battle-hardened veteran. You had been in the Battle of the Bulge as we know it?

John Lassing: Well, not the Battle of the Bulge, so much. What had happened was the Second Armored Division was a little southwest of Strasbourg, France. We were then attached to the Third Army, which was George Patton's army. We had been attached earlier, a good little bit earlier, to Patch's First Army when we came in on the beach and through most of France. But when we got over to Alsace-Lorraine, they sent us south to the Colmar region of France. We were in what we call the "Colmar Pocket." We went down in, got kind of cut off, and we had to fight our way out. That was all right. We didn't have any trouble doing that. It wasn't a big deal. But the way we got out of there was, late one afternoon we were trying to reconnoiter an area to find out where the soft spot was that we could punch through. Then here comes Patton's jeep. Now, you couldn't mistake George Patton's jeep. It looked like a jeep until you got to the driver. And he had welded around him tank steel all the way around it. I'm talking about the driver now. I'm not talking about General Patton. Somebody asked the general why. He said, "Because if they kill my driver, I'm a dead duck, so you protect him," and they did. I guess that was the same driver that was driving the car when George Patton died as far as I know. I wasn't over there so I don't know that for sure. But he came charging in to our area and got out of that jeep and got up on a tank. Now this is December and it's pretty cold down there. But he got up with just his normal inside clothes on and stood on that tank. He had two pearl-handle revolvers in a belt wrapped around his waist. He stood up there and I was expecting—I had never been around him or heard him or anything—I was expecting a big man, 6'4", 250 pounds maybe. I was expecting a deep bass voice to come at me. The squeakiest little voice you ever saw came at

me. What it said was that the Germans had surrounded General McAuliffe in Bastogne and they asked him to surrender and he said, “Nuts!” Patton said, “Gentlemen, we are going to get him.” Patton’s lead tank driver was a buck sergeant. He said, “We do this on the blackout?” Patton said, “Hell, no. We turn them on. We go and get him.” We did. I guess that it took us three days and three nights. We got there the third night. We were on the hills south-southeast of Bastogne. The snow was above my ankles. It was cold. We sat there and waited. Patton said, “In the morning, we’ll go get him.” I thought, “Boy, it’s going to be tough.” Foggy, no air cover, no nothing. Lord smiled on us. Christmas Eve dawned bright and our Air Force put enough planes in the sky to chop the Germans up. For three hours, you couldn’t hear yourself think from the airplane engines. They really landed on them. We went down and got General McAuliffe. Not us alone. We had people all around Bastogne that were coming. They came in from different sectors. It wasn’t by ourselves. We didn’t do anything much by ourselves. We had help and lots of it most of the time. We just went in and got our general. That’s all.

Interviewer: John, I’m curious. You were 19, just a boy, do you remember whether you felt like a boy or a man?

John Lassing: Didn’t have any feelings either way. Felt like a tired dog face. “Dog face” is slang for combat infantryman. Felt like a tired—outside of that, nothing. I had no sensation whether I was a boy or a man or anything. All I wanted to do was get it over and come home.

Interviewer: You said that and that you were fighting for our freedom...

John Lassing: That’s exactly right.

Interviewer: Had you heard anything about German atrocity or...?

John Lassing: I didn’t hear anything. We had heard absolute—well, in fact, when we got into Germany—when we got into Mannheim and Heidelberg and those towns—and nothing. We thought, “Yes, that’s an enemy town. We’ll take it.” But there’s nothing basically wrong here, not at all.

Interviewer: Okay. So tell us about going on over toward Munich and how you got to Dachau.

John Lassing: Well, when got through Bastogne which was—we actually took it Christmas Day of 1944. When we got through there, Patton had us stay up there just in case they decided they’d try it again through the weak spot. General McAuliffe, he was really caught in a bind because he didn’t have any people left. Bastogne was one of the big American killing places. The Malmedy crossroad slayings and all that kind of stuff were right there. They probably killed more Americans in the Battle of the Bulge than anywhere else, in any one battle over there. He wanted us to stay. So we stayed till about January which would have been a week basically. Then we went back, the exact route we had come up from the south and got back into Colmar. That’s why we were trying to get down and come in

to Munich from the southwest with them looking at us coming from the west and the northwest. But, as I told you, I never got to Munich. The only time I was ever in Munich was when we went back over there in '85. She and I went to Munich. But I had never been in Munich. Berchtesgaden? Ah, yes. Do you remember Berchtesgaden was Hitler's mountain retreat? We thought that rascal was up there. They couldn't find him in Berlin and we thought he was up there and we stormed up that thing to get him. Of course, he wasn't there when we got there.

Interviewer: And this was March?

John Lassing: Anyway, we tried. This was April probably.

Interviewer: April, 1945.

John Lassing: Yes. And I had been to Dachau before I went to Berchtesgaden. So it was late April, maybe early May, but late April for sure. I thought, "Boy, it would be great if we could find him and capture that rascal." Because we had seen Dachau then.

Interviewer: Tell us about getting into Dachau.

John Lassing: Well, we approached Munich, as I said, from the southwest. Somewhere along the line, we got crossed up. Maybe the Germans had changed the road signs. Maybe the roads weren't ever meant to be that way. But we got crossed up. Dachau is about 60 miles. Look, I'm calling 45 years of memory here now. It's about 60 miles from Munich, maybe 65. And it is west-northwest of Munich. So as we approached, we got confused and instead of going to Munich, we went to Dachau. Dachau was a little town. There wasn't much resistance there. We took that without any problems. Then somebody got wind of a camp. We went to the encampment. When I show you some of these pictures, I'll show you where we went in and how we went in.

Interviewer: And this is the Second Armored?

John Lassing: Well, that's the division.

Interviewer: And these are the first troops to go into Dachau?

John Lassing: Well, I won't say they're the first. We were among the first. Everybody's converging now. Once word gets out that we got this thing and everybody's converging, there's a pocket of SS people, "Black boots" as I call them, up there. And they're not going to give up. You're going to have to go in there and get them. Nobody in our group had any reservations about going in there and getting them. They were hated people and nobody had any reservations. That was fine. But what we saw when we got in there changed everybody's mind. It's hard for me to imagine now running through that gate and stopping. And here looking down and having a man pull my leg. He couldn't speak my language but

he was hungry. He wanted to pull up. He wanted food, starving. I bet he didn't weigh any more than a Mr. Kadar did. He had been 180-pound man, starved. Let me give you a little history. Maybe you already know this. Adolf Hitler came to power about the time Franklin Roosevelt did in this country, 1933 in January. In March of 1933, he opened Dachau as a concentration camp. Don't misunderstand me now. There was not killing there then. The sign over the gate as you came in said, "Work will make you free." But they didn't work. They were slave-driven on half-diets, on lack of water. And so they deteriorated. The longer they were there, the more they deteriorated. And the more people they brought in to do the work, the more they had to do something with the deteriorated people that they had. So, at first, they went out the back of Dachau concentration camp and took a bulldozer and they dug a six-foot, hundred-foot-long trench. They piled the bodies in it and covered them up. That's the kind of people you're dealing with. Then it got so bad they couldn't do that, so they built the crematoriums. We found one old Polish fellow in Dachau who was almost positive that he had cremated his own son. Can you imagine how that man must have felt? It just defied description. We had so many of the inmates—and that's what I got to call them because that's really what they were—that had done things that normally you wouldn't do. They were whipped or beat in to doing it. When a man died, they stripped his clothes off. Any teeth he had in his mouth that had gold in them, they yanked out and saved the gold. They don't want to bury anything that was of value. This is a kind of person you were dealing with. So my sojourn in Dachau was not one I like to recall but one I'd like for future generations to know so it would never happen again to any people. It shouldn't happen to anybody and that's my purpose in being here. That's why between you and my family, I am here and no other reason.

Interviewer: John, did you go in on the first day that Dachau was liberated?

John Lassing: Yes, I did. I can't say I was the first one in there. I can't say that there weren't other—well, I know that the forty—was it the 42nd Armored, not Armored, 42nd Infantry Division—came from another area, and I know the way. I believe there was a division that came in from the north that got through one of those railroad-car gates. I don't know. You got to understand, it was a mess. Nobody knew what the other hand was doing really. We were trying to get tetanus shots, get any kind of food, get any kind of medical supplies to the people that were in there. You had to be careful. You had to be really careful because you back a truckload of food up and they'll tear the truck up to get to the food. We never have seen anybody that hungry but I have. And they were hungry, man. They would have eaten anything. It just tears you up when you think about it. It really tears you up.

Interviewer: Before you do that, tell me everything you remember...

All right, this is segment three—John Lassing, May 20, 1990. John, do you remember the exact day this was in April 1945. No?

John Lassing: No, I do not remember the dates.

Interviewer: You didn't. Of course, nobody knew much about Dachau and...

John Lassing: Nobody knew anything about Dachau.

Interviewer: All right. You didn't know what you were going in?

John Lassing: No.

Interviewer: Some kind of encampment?

John Lassing: Yes. We had taken the town then. And I guess Dachau concentration camp was maybe two or three miles out of town. And we had taken the little town. It wasn't that [ghastly 0:37:50.9] little town. It was probably a town 50,000 or something like that. But there wasn't much resistance in the town so we didn't dally long there. Somebody got word that this encampment was out there three miles. I said, "Let's go see that." And we went out there. Well, when we pulled up, the first thing we got was some machine pistol fire out of the guardhouse. Now the gate I'll show you where the sign said: "Work shall make you free." On each side of that gate was a guard house and it was filled with SS guards. They were fanatic. They weren't about to give up. We did take some of them prisoner right out of there but they were not going to give up. We had had, up to that time, Germany Army running over us to give up, to get on the American side of the prisoner-of-war rather than the Russian. But these people were not ready to do that. So I'm sure I don't know this for an exact fact but I'm sure that a lot of the guards were killed because they wouldn't give up and we had them outnumbered about five-to-one, something like that. We just went on about our business. I don't remember how it came about but one of the combat infantryman hollered, "We need medics," and that's how I got to go. We went up and went through that gate. As I walked through the gate, the first thing I saw was a railroad siding of gondola-type cars. I believe, 45 years of memory, that there were 28 of them filled to the brim with dead bodies. That's the first thing I remember seeing and then I looked down and here's this poor devil who was...

He wanted something to eat so bad, I remember I had a chocolate bar in my shirt pocket and I gave it to him. He wolfed it down. It stayed about three seconds. He came right back and then I only tried to get him not to eat hurriedly, to take small bites, to eat many times, eat little, rest awhile, eat a little more, and get where they could digest what food they took in. It was hard.

Interviewer: Were there bodies everywhere?

John Lassing: Oh, yes. Oh, gosh. Yes. They were—most of the bodies that were not in the cars were still alive. Some of them were ill. Some of them were down in the barracks on bed, couldn't get out, had been whipped in the bed. Tried to make them get up and get out. They just were slaves, it's all you can say, and driven by this

people who had no compassion for anything. That's basically what the concentration camps were. I don't believe that anybody could have gone in there and said that, "Well, these people are just here and we couldn't get all the food they needed so they are down to," like Mr. Kadar, 70 pounds, That didn't happen. There's no way that can happen. It was a real experience for a 19-year-old.

Interviewer: Was there a smell?

John Lassing: Oh, very decidedly. You don't pile bodies in open-top gondola cars and have 25 cars or 28 cars sitting on the siding and not have smell. Of course, what they were really were trying to do, I think, was get the crematorium going and burn them. They burned a lot of them. They haul—it was sneaky. They had that railroad siding coming into that camp. They would go out and bring in from somewhere else in railroad cars—box cars now—these people, and get them inside the camp and let them out, put them in the back. They back the train out. So they didn't know how they got there. They were brought in at night. They didn't know where they were, how they got there or anything else. The next thing they knew they were getting a real first look of what it meant for the Third Reich to take you prisoner. That's what they were: prisoners. They weren't prisoners-of-war, they were prisoners.

Interviewer: You've never forgotten going into Dachau.

John Lassing: Never. I never will. It's etched in my brain like I never will forget Omaha Beach either. It's stuffed there too but that's different. That's different. They were running around on top where I could see them and they could see us running around the beach and we were helping. In Dachau, it wasn't that way.

Interviewer: How long were you at Dachau?

John Lassing: Nine days, I believe, if I remember correctly—eight or nine days. I was there longer than—my medic group was there longer than any of the rest of our outfit because we had to treat people. They looked at me like I was silly when I told them I wanted rubber gloves, because disease was running rampant. In that concentration camp—[Berlin 0:45:33.7], I'm going to call you that—they took men like us that were healthy, put them in altitude chamber, gave them no oxygen and in lowered altitude to 50,000 feet, see how much the human body could stand. Have any idea what that does to a body without oxygen, without the right pressure? It explodes—literally explode. They take them in break ice water and stand them in the water until the bodies turn blue, they were nude, and they turn blue. Then bring them in and running in the room over a hundred degrees, as in what that would be like to you. So they really—they did a little of everything to see what the human body could stand as well as what the mind could stand. It wasn't right. No way. Give me time, please.

Interviewer: Okay.

John Lassing: All the bodies that were laid out were not always dead. Ill, yes, but not always dead. And it was nothing, as Mr. Kadar found out, to your moaning, coming out of a pile of dead bodies. There wasn't but one thing you could do, combat boots, shoes and all, is get up there and get on that pile and start looking for that man that was moaning because that was a life maybe you could save.

Interviewer: Talk about what you did as a medic in those eight or nine days.

John Lassing: Basically, we took people who were starved and fed them. We took people who were ill and medicated to them—tetanus, typhoid, all those things—shot them.

Interviewer: Now you didn't have medicines and food when you moved in, but you got...?

John Lassing: We got them. It wasn't any problem. I had some medication in the jeep that I rode in but we got them. Most of the medication I had was for wounds like sulfur. You sprinkle sulfur on the wound and bandage it. We had morphine which is a painkiller and we had—well, later, that far along I guess we had all kinds of antitoxins. Is that the word I want?

Interviewer: Antibiotics?

John Lassing: Antibiotics that we tried to use to get them to respond. You know, some of them were so lethargic, they wouldn't respond to anything but food. That's all they wanted. I have never seen anybody that hungry. I had never been around anybody who was that hungry. Can you imagine standing there and having a man crawl up to your leg, grab. I don't mean just reach out and grab hold. This is a drowning man's grasp to get something to eat. I never forget the look out of the eyes. That's what stays with me. A look that says, "Can't you help me? Can't you feed me?" And I don't know how you ever overcome it. We stayed there long enough to see most of them back to—they moved the—I've forgotten. It seemed like to me they moved the field hospital up there that had a big kitchen. They fed them. Most of the time, I didn't give them but half serving because we didn't figure they could tolerate any more than that. But the time I left, they had a kitchen. They were in a mess line [so to speak] and grinning from ear to ear. No matter how sick they were, they were still free, and being fed and that's really all that counted.

Interviewer: John, you took some photographs.

John Lassing: Yes, I did. Well, no. I didn't take them.

Interviewer: You didn't take them?

John Lassing: But somebody in our outfit took them with a little box camera. I have a set here for you.

Interviewer: Tell us about the other set you're not giving us...

John Lassing: All right. These are made with a little box camera. That's about all they had in 1945. But these are black-and-white photographs of Dachau.

Interviewer: Turn it around this way just show us one of those anyway.

John Lassing: Well, let me get over with one. That is the guard house and gate coming in to Dachau. Did you get it all right?

Interviewer: Yes.

John Lassing: Okay.

Interviewer: But you're not going to give us those because...

John Lassing: No, because I don't have the negatives for these. The pictures I'm going to give you I took to a photograph bought here and had them take these pictures and make me negatives and then print me a set for you.

Interviewer: Why didn't you want to give me those, John?

John Lassing: I carried these 45 years. I don't need to be reminded. But if I ever do, that's my reminder.

Male: Can you explain this?

John Lassing: Huh?

Male: Can you explain those?

Interviewer: Do you want to say something?

John Lassing: This is the moat and in the background is a guard tower that has machine guns that rotate 360 degrees. They were never manned by over two people. But they were very deadly. Anybody that tried to get out of that concentration camp came over that fence that's behind and had to go through that water and they never got through—they died going over the fence or in the water.

Interviewer: Why don't you turn to the ones that you had made from that which were a little clearer and...

John Lassing: Yes, much clearer and much better.

Interviewer: And just hold them up one by one kind of up against you and tell us what's there and what you remember about it.

John Lassing: This is to the left—do you see that alright? This is to the left of the guard house. The entrance to the concentration camp was over to our left as we look at this picture.

Interviewer: There's a chimney in the background.

John Lassing: I forgot to look. Let me look and I'll turn it back. Part of the heating plant for the guard house, didn't go up very high. That's the entrance. Now when I went back 41 years later, they had closed that entrance. You could no longer enter Dachau. We came in down here by the railroad. Those are clothes of prisoners piled up to be searched for valuables, or washed and dyed and made into things for the troops.

Interviewer: Clothes that had been taken off of dead?

John Lassing: Off of dead prisoners. That's the picture I showed you before with the moat and the guard tower in the background.

Interviewer: And an electrified fence all around it?

John Lassing: Yes. And if they got through the fence, they didn't get through the moat. The guard tower in the background saw that they didn't get through the moat. These are ones who died probably of starvation. Some of them had probably been guinea-pigged like we talked about.

Interviewer: Medical experiments?

John Lassing: Medical experiments. But most of them died of starvation.

Interviewer: There was a typhus epidemic too, wasn't there?

John Lassing: Oh, yes. I forgot about that. That's the doorway to the crematorium. They had three gas furnaces, the steel stretchers in the mouth of the furnace. They put the bodies on the steel stretchers. Somebody picked the stretcher up, it was on a deal where you picked up on this end and they slid in to the furnace and burn in them. Some of them were not dead. Some of them were burned alive. In the crematorium, they had a room off to the side. I believe that's where they put most of the teeth and lockets and gold and watches and rings that they took off of people in to be melted down and made into something for the SS troop's ladies or somebody else.

Interviewer: John, when you and Betty went back 41 years later, what was the crematorium like then?

John Lassing: Well, of course, they have made Dachau—I wouldn't call it a shrine but they have made a Dachau—they didn't do anything to destroy any of that except the old wooden barracks. They probably had to destroy them because they probably were termite-infested. They had plenty of them out there. But the major difference was that everything was in place. It didn't look like it did 41 years before but it was in place. I knew where I was. I didn't have to be told. I could point to her and say, "This is what I saw and this is what they used it for." She would know what I was talking about. Ready? Bodies stacked up in cars. Live people on them sometimes, sometimes not. You had to search it out. You had to be aware that there was a possibility and look for it. I think these kind of

speaking for themselves, the poor devil. Never knew what hit him so to speak. This is a gondola-type car with some in it. This is the way I first saw it. That type car with the doors closed, just ajar, not quite open. You could see in but they weren't open enough to really tell what it was. You walk closer and you don't doubt what it was because the odor took care of that. This is the train that they brought them in. They're box cars, not big as ours, but they're box cars. To the right of that train is the fence and the moat if I'm looking the right way. No. It may be to the train's left. Now the gondola type car and here's some that tried to get away and never made it. I'd like to present these to you, [Beverly]? I also like to tell you that in this thing right here are the negatives if you want more copies.

Interviewer: We can make them.

John Lassing: Either that or if you will give them to me, I'll have them made and I'll give them to you. Either way it doesn't...

Interviewer: No, we're glad to have them as a part of the record and...

John Lassing: It is definite a part of the record. Definitely is. And it's, like I said, I have a feeling for these black-and-white ones that I just don't feel like I can give them up yet.

Interviewer: I have several other questions.

John Lassing: Oh, sure.

Interviewer: You were there nine days. The war was over—what, a month later or less?

John Lassing: Less, a lot less. The war was over—for all practical purposes, the war was over May 1. They didn't finally surrender till the 8th of May but it was—the shooting was gone. May 1st, there was no more. We just took prisoners and took them back. Tried to clean them up and turn them loose and let them go to their homes.

Interviewer: How did you live with what you had just seen?

John Lassing: I don't know if I understand what you mean.

Interviewer: How did it affect you then?

John Lassing: I would say that it really shattered my belief in human nature—that all people are good because they've just proven to me that they were not. I'd say that had a bearing on what I felt.

Interviewer: Did you learn about the other camps?

John Lassing: Not until after the war was over. I did not learn about it. Of course, there were many other. Dachau, I believe, had 11 sub-camps around it where they'd put them in there and condition them maybe and then send them on to Dachau.

When they got into the sub-camp, if they weren't doing right, they were sent to Dachau for extermination in later years. That's how they came about. There were so many of them. Of course, you think of the famous ones—Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen and Birkenau. You think of all those famous ones, Dachau and all those—but some of the little camps were just as bad as some of the big ones. There just weren't as many in the little camps as there were in the big.

Interviewer: Did you tell people about this when you came home?

John Lassing: No. No, I could not talk about it. There's no way I could talk about it. I could not talk about some of my other experiences in the war. I could not and did not. I was never able to talk about this much until after we married. She was going through the cedar chest, and found my box. And she wanted to know about it. And I told her about it. I really—well, I'll ask her sometime—but I really don't think she believed what I was telling her because it was so gruesome, so ungodly, that I...don't think she mistrusted me, I just don't think she believed what I was telling her. That's one reason I wanted to go back. I wanted to take my wife back and let her look at what I had seen and then look at the pictures and imagine what it was like there then. Like the old TV show that on—"This is May of 1945 and you are there." That's difficult to imagine.

Interviewer: John, you've always told me that you're a behind-the-scenes person. You don't like doing what you're doing...

John Lassing: Very definitely behind-the-scenes. I do not like to be out front. I have never liked that. I have never wanted anything for myself. I want for my children and my wife but not for me. I had a hard time doing this without their support and their—"You ought to do it. Without question, you ought to do it." And yours, I would not have done it this time. I just am not that type of person. When my youngest daughter was in Saint Cecilia, they were studying this. And I guess through normal family conversations around the dinner table. I had said something about it or mom and I had talked about it. She told her teacher that I had been there. That sister called me and asked me if I'd come and talk to her history class. And I told her the same thing I told you, "I'm not an up-front person." But she said, "If you will impart your knowledge to these children, maybe it will never happen again." And I went up there when Mary Catherine was a senior and talked to two history classes about it. That's the only time outside of the time I talked to you that I have ever talked about it.

Interviewer: But you know it's an important story to tell?

John Lassing: Very definitely.

Interviewer: You mentioned [Guri] Kadar a couple of times and his art. Your family and I finally prevailed that you make your story a part of the record.

John Lassing: Yes, that's right. But I don't have any reason not to talk about it now, because we, as a people, should never let this happen again under any circumstances. I

know you can say to me, "Oh my lord, the homeless down here are starving," "Oh my Lord, South Africans are being killed." Yes, that's true. I know that. But this wasn't like that. This was captive. This was prisoner. None of the prisoners in the Tennessee State Penitentiary get treated like these people were treated, none of them. And so it should never ever occur again. It should be left and yet known for its true facts. I remember a man writing a letter to the editor of the Nashville Banner. And I got perfectly furious. If Jimmy Stahlman had been then publisher of the Banner, I would have met that young man eyeball to eyeball because he didn't anymore know what he was talking about than a man in the moon. And Jimmy would have...

Interviewer: What did he do?

John Lassing: He wrote a letter to the Banner saying the Holocaust never happened. There weren't any concentration camps in Germany. There weren't any killings in Germany. And, man, I got proof right there that there were and I was there. That's all I need.

Interviewer: John, we certainly thank you for doing this.

John Lassing: You're welcome. I hope I have given you something you can use.

Interviewer: You know you have.

John Lassing: I hope so.

Interviewer: We thank Betty and your children too.

John Lassing: Yes.

Interviewer: Their influence.

John Lassing: Well, they really made me do it.