

Fort Hunt Oral History
P.O. Box 1142
Interview with Oscar Holderer by Brandon Bies and Vincent Santucci
Huntsville, Alabama
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INTERVIEWER: -- some of your most basic but important information like when and where were you born?

OSCAR HOLDERER: I was born on November 4, 1919 in a small town named Prüm [00:17]. P-R-Ü-M.

INT: Okay. And did you have any siblings? Any brothers or sisters?

OH: I had one brother, he was killed in Russian War [00:31] -- the war in Russia, and a sister. They both pre-deceased me.

INT: And did you go to school growing up in that town, did you live in that small town?

OH: Oh no, no, no. As a matter of fact I have no recollection in living there.

INT: Okay.

OH: We moved to Berlin [00:54].

INT: Oh, okay.

OH: My father was a surveyor, and as a surveyor [01:00] -- the French, who occupied that part after World War I [01:06] expelled him because there was to be a vote if the people wanted to be annexed to France. And correctly so, they thought my father wouldn't vote the right way for them.

INT: [affirmative] [laughs] Had your father been -- just out of curiosity, had your father been in the First World War [01:29]?

OH: Yes. I was born right after he came out of service.

INT: Got you. So --

OH: Nine months later.

[laughter]

INT: I'm sure there was probably a baby boom right then, so. When you were growing up then in Berlin [01:46], what did you want to be when you were growing up? Did you have an aspiration to a particular job when you were a child?

OH: I had few friends and I played with -- I disassembled [02:00] machinery stuff and gadgets.

INT: [affirmative]

OH: And -- but I was not a good, let's say -- I thought learning was dull. And I argued with my mother, "A plumber can be just as happy as an engineer," or something. And she said, "You go to college."

INT: [laughs]

OH: And I went to college.

INT: [affirmative] And so when did you finish your basic schooling and go to college? Do you remember about what year that was?

OH: No. '42, perhaps. '42 is the closest I can --

INT: Okay. It's when -- that's when you started college? Or when you --

OH: That's when they -- I was drafted first but then the Army wanted only the best -- the German Army [03:00].

INT: [affirmative]

OH: And I had asthma.

INT: Okay.

OH: And they let me go. So I was able to go to college.

INT: Okay.

OH: And I was, as I just explained to your colleague, at the level of what I would say what some called BSE in mechanical engineering. And then they drafted me again --

INT: Okay.

OH: -- because that's when the war in Russia [03:31] went sour and they needed everybody.

INT: Right. And so you were actually drafted once, they realized you had asthma, so they let you go back to finish your schooling.

OH: Not out of sympathy. They just didn't want me.

[laughter]

INT: Right.

INT: And what college or university?

OH: At that time it was called TH -- Technische Hochschule [03:59] in Berlin [04:00]. Now they've renamed it, I think, as University of Berlin.

INT: Oh, okay. Okay.

OH: Still has a technical emphasis but they added a few humanities in it now to make it a little more soft.

[laughter]

Now that was the trend after the wars.

INT: [affirmative] And so did you work any jobs in the meanwhile when you were in school or?

OH: Well, as a matter of fact, in Germany to enter college of this type, the university of that type, you had to perform half a year of apprenticeship in various shops. And the most interesting -- I worked in -- the company was called Hollerith [04:53]. And Hollerith is the forerunner -- it became IBM [05:00]. It was the company that built this punching

machine for punch cards. I do not know if you remember -- most people don't remember them.

INT: I've heard of them. [laughs]

OH: Okay. But that's interesting. I worked for Hollerith [05:18], which is now IBM, for a few weeks. Then I worked in a foundry just to get the engineers, get a feel for what's going on in the field.

INT: Okay. And just out of curiosity, what sorts of jobs were you doing at the -- you mentioned you were at a foundry?

OH: Foundry, machine shop, Hollerith [05:48] -- well, they assigned me lowly jobs.

INT: Okay.

OH: Yes.

INT: Okay, okay.

OH: But those were specially picked industries [06:00] that really -- not the run of the mill corner machine shop.

INT: [affirmative] Sure.

OH: They were approved by the -- as a matter of fact, they sent me there. I didn't have much of a choice. It was just two weeks here, three weeks there.

INT: Is it safe to say they were all jobs that were supporting the war effort? Were they for the war industry?

OH: There was no feel of war industry being done.

INT: Okay.

OH: I didn't have that feeling.

INT: But were they -- like the foundry. Was it producing something for the war industry?

OH: I don't know what --

INT: Okay. Just --

OH: But this was before the war.

INT: Oh, this was before the war.

OH: Yeah, that was before the war.

INT: So this would have been the late 1930s then [07:00]?

OH: [affirmative]

INT: Oh, okay. I didn't realize that.

OH: Yes, yes. That was before.

INT: Okay. So then what year did you -- after doing these sort of jobs here and there --

OH: For half a year, yes.

INT: -- right -- what year did you enter the university?

OH: University?

INT: Yes.

OH: Well, it must have been in '39.

INT: Okay. Okay. And then were you -- so they attempted to draft you then sometime early on.

OH: Yes.

INT: Okay. And that's when you had asthma and they postponed it or said they didn't want you.

OH: Yes. Yes.

INT: And then when did they draft -- at the very end of your studies at the university, they drafted you for real this second time.

OH: Yeah, yeah.

INT: And about what year? You thought that was '42?

OH: It must have been '41.

INT: Okay.

OH: Maybe.

INT: Okay. And so then what happened? When you were drafted [08:00] and pulled away from your studies, what branch of service did you go into?

OH: I was drafted and most of those guys were sent to Russia.

INT: [affirmative]

OH: I had the flu at that moment and whoever was in sick bay at that time was not shipped -- they shipped them to homeland company, homeland service. Still Army, uniform, worked the regs [phonetic]. Washed the rifles.

[laughter]

And you do these regs [phonetic] standing guard at food warehouses and stuff in Berlin [08:51]. And that's where my future wife [09:00] also lived.

INT: Okay.

OH: And we were already befriended. We could see each other quite often. And then one sudden day I was called to the Commander's office and he said, "We have orders for you. Very secret." "Where to?" I don't know. Ticket -- I got a railroad ticket, my [unintelligible] in there and then I arrived in Zinnowitz which is a little town outside of Peenemünde [09:43]. And I was instructed where to go, and from then on I was in Peenemünde. And they kept those soldiers in uniform. About half the workers at the V2 [09:58] development were soldier employees [10:00].

INT: Okay. And you were one of those?

OH: I was one of those.

INT: Okay.

OH: And -- including high-ranking people -- Dr. Stuhlinger [10:12], he was one of those.

INT: [affirmative]

OH: What they did -- see, this was a desperation effort so to speak, this V2 [10:21] thing, by the Nazis [10:31] -- and they allowed Von Braun [10:33], his General, to pull people out of -- even from the front -- if they had the right -- and I was listed as an engineer. So that's how I got there.

INT: [affirmative]

OH: They pulled me out, sent me out there. And I had a wonderful time there. I was just a PFC. I had a newly built [11:00] two-bedroom, one bath, almost like a motel-type accommodation, worked my eight hours [laughs].

INT: Had you heard of Peenemünde [11:17] before you got out there?

OH: [negative] No, no.

INT: So this was totally secret.

OH: [affirmative]

INT: Totally secret.

OH: [affirmative]

INT: Do you know approximately what date it was that you arrived at Peenemünde [11:27]?

OH: Between '41 and '42.

INT: And by that time Peenemünde was already in full operation?

OH: Well, they were already firing what they called A4 [11:44], I think --

INT: [affirmative]

OH: -- was the code name for that experimental version. And I would say half of them went bad --that's probably created [12:00] -- we've got to do more to get that thing working right.

INT: So --

OH: Yes, sir.

INT: No, go ahead.

OH: No, I mean, I didn't contribute much to the V2 [12:12] except they did want to recover them intact. You see, once they fired them they never knew -- they splashed into the Baltic Ocean -- they never knew what did really happen to them. And they -- so my only contribution to the V2 [12:32] if you want to call it that, to design -- the V2 had fins -- to design flaps that folded out to slow it down enough so they could deploy a parachute. When it comes down it's too fast for a parachute.

INT: Okay.

OH: It would rip off.

INT: Huh.

OH: But it was my task to design [13:00] -- I think it was in fabrication when the bombing occurred. And that changed the order.

INT: So your design that you came up with, that was never implemented then in the --

OH: It was made. I saw it in the shop but it was never --

INT: Implemented.

OH: -- put on the [unintelligible].

INT: Okay.

OH: Yeah.

INT: We refer to it -- the Americans refer to it as V2 [13:27].

OH: V2.

INT: What would you call it at the time in German? What name would you have for the rocket?

OH: I think it was called V because V stands for Vergeltung. Revenge.

INT: Okay.

OH: Vergeltung is revenge. And they had -- the air force had developed a V1 [13:47]. You're familiar with that?

INT: Yes.

OH: Okay. And then the V2 [13:53], but the V1 was -- antiaircraft [14:00] -- ineffective.

INT: [affirmative]

OH: V2 could not be intercepted. They fired and, not with great precision, but let's say, you fired from Birmingham, well, you would hit Huntsville somewhere.

[laughter]

INT: And so the A4 [14:27], that was just the prototype name for it at the time?

OH: Right. Yeah.

INT: Okay. Okay.

INT: And again, do you recall approximately when Peenemünde [14:38] was bombed?

OH: I should really know that but I was in the ditch and it was, in a sense, a beautiful affair because the squadrons of bombers [15:00], they just flew in a straight flow, and they said, "Release." But once -- they simply followed the flares that spotter planes had put in the sky. Red, blue, and green -- it was beautiful, like fireworks, they were in the sky. And

the bombers followed those things. They couldn't see on the ground. And it was my luck that there was a slight southerly breeze, and about a third or more of the bombs fell into the water.

[laughter]

Away from where I was quartered. There was no casualty in the area where I was quartered.

INT: So just --

OH: It was a nighttime bombing but it sure took care of the office where I worked [16:00].
Nothing left there.

INT: [affirmative]

OH: Just a testing area. We were there -- I was given a salvage -- we salvaged for a day or so in the rubble, nothing.

INT: Go ahead, continue.

OH: They were actually afraid of the second bombing run but it never occurred -- but then I was -- we were put in little villages just for about a few days to get out of harm's way. And then I was told to report to the Air Force Station and I dropped my Army uniform [laughs], got the Air Force uniform which was much better anyway --

[laughter]

-- and assigned to this Raumschiffahrt [16:55] [phonetic] project. And there I designed [17:00] the drive motors, gear motors -- in those days they used rudders for jet planes that actually penetrated into the jet stream and deflected --- it's not done that way anymore. Nowadays they move the [unintelligible] --

INT: So how long was it, roughly, from when you first got to Peenemünde [17:27] to when

that first bombing occurred?

OH: The bombing -- some of my colleagues must have -- that date must be known somewhere. '44 somewhere?

INT: Were you there for one year, two years, more, before the bombing?

OH: I was -- I'd say roughly two years on what you might call V2 [18:00] related stuff and one year on Raumschiffahrt [18:03] approximately.

INT: Okay.

OH: And then we just left and we went west because the Russians came. [laughs]

INT: So from the time you arrived at Peenemünde [18:16] until the bombing, the first bombing, did Peenemünde change in any way?

OH: No.

INT: Were there more people that came in?

OH: No. As I said, roughly half the soldiers went out. Just a rough guess. A thousand people were up there. Maybe two thousand, I don't know.

INT: How did things change after the bombing? Do you feel that the bombing was directly responsible for you being reassigned? Or do you think that would have happened anyhow?

OH: That's a good question. I can't answer that. I don't know. Somebody, and I don't know who, decided we needed antiaircraft missiles [19:00]. [laughs] And I'm not that high in the military hierarchy to say who talked to whom that we should develop Raumschiffahrt [19:19]. I just don't know.

INT: And this work that you were doing for the anti-aircraft missile -- was it also at Peenemünde [19:28]?

OH: No, it was in the village east about east about 30 miles east of Peenemünde. A small resort village right on the Baltic Sea [19:41].

INT: Was this a brand-new program?

OH: Yes.

INT: Okay. And were the folks you were working with there all engineers out of Peenemünde [19:54]?

OH: Yes.

INT: Okay.

OH: Including this guy, Mr. Patt [19:58], who I told you [20:00] worked with Von Braun [20:01] even before, yeah.

INT: Did you know anything about the organization of groups at Peenemünde [20:13]?

OH: Very little. I worked on the design, I don't know if they call it a department. Just like anything that big is organized. In fact, here at NASA [20:29] we called them laboratories and our laboratories had divisions and divisions had branches.

INT: And so at Peenemünde [20:40] you had a work group of people that you worked with all the time?

OH: Yes. In the design.

INT: All design.

OH: In the design department.

INT: But mostly engineers?

OH: A few draftsmen perhaps but mostly engineers.

INT: Okay. Did you know anything about what the other groups did [21:00]?

OH: No.

INT: Were you instructed to not ask questions?

OH: No, no.

INT: Can you tell us about that? The secrecy?

OH: I never felt the secrecy there.

INT: Were you allowed to tell others what you were doing?

OH: Did I tell my girlfriend, or later my wife? I don't know. I know it was obviously -- but I do not know the specific rules. No, I don't know. Actually when I worked here I had a secret clearance, you know, confidential [22:00] -- it was the army, but I don't know of anybody preaching me what to say or not to say. I think it was understood. Now, while I had that clearance in our office we had to lock and sign and lock the safes, but Peenemünde [22:22] was so fenced in and I don't think we were -- all these guards wearing these long -- I don't they were locked in.

INT: At Peenemünde [22:39] did you have direct dealings with Dr. Von Braun [22:42]?

OH: No.

INT: Okay.

OH: No.

INT: Do you know if -- was he involved in the missile program that you were later working on? Was he at all associated with that?

OH: This Raumschiffahrt [22:56] thing?

INT: Yes.

OH: He must have had a connection [23:00] but what I don't know because otherwise he or the General that he worked with wouldn't have known about it.

INT: [affirmative] Can you talk for just a minute or two about the anti-aircraft missile program?

Was it ever -- it sounds like, from our discussions earlier, it never was -- was it ever fully implemented? Or it never --

OH: Never was fully assembled even. There were people in charge of scrounging the industry to get parts with high priority according to drawings that I made and some others made, but no, it never flew --

INT: So there was never a test firing.

OH: Never a test firing, no.

INT: Okay.

OH: No. Too late, too little.

[laughter]

INT: Just purely out of curiosity, what was the technology? You mentioned earlier about heat -- was it meant to be heat-seeking [24:00] or was it a --

OH: I'm not an electronics engineer but I understand that it would have been if it would have flown, ever. Because otherwise that's probably created the authority or the [unintelligible], "Oh, if we have that technology, let's build one." But it was -- the war was already lost.

INT: So how -- describe how things went from there. You were working close by Peenemünde [24:39] on this program --

OH: Raumschiffahrt [24:42].

IN: -- and then what happened? You just said yourself the war was obviously lost at this point. Can you describe the end?

OH: We went to work as usual but some reason I think, "There's thunder." No [25:00], it was the Russian artillery that we could hear already and we got nervous. [laughs] And it

wasn't but a day or so later that it -- somebody said, "Pack up. Be at the railroad station at this hour and wait there. There will be a train to pick you up." And I have a picture of us standing in that train station. [laughs] That's the only picture I have that I remember.

INT: And so then where did you go? Where did the train take you?

OH: Barsinghausen [25:41].

INT: Okay.

OH: Barsinghausen. It was this -- sort of in the middle of Germany-- but, yeah.

INT: Did this train [26:00] have other engineers from Peenemünde [26:04] or was it just your missile group at this point?

OH: It -- well, the whole train was -- we were just a small group from Raumschiffahrt [26:13]. Most of them were from V2 [26:15] people.

INT: Okay. And so they were all on the train together?

OH: [affirmative]

INT: Okay.

OH: If there was another train later on, I don't know, but I was on a train. Six cars, locomotive, train was packed full, I was one of them. We got out at Visselhövede [26:38] [phonetic].

INT: And what happened when you got out there?

OH: Well, we were given rations and I don't know where I slept. I forgot. But it wasn't very long -- well, a few days. Probably a week or so we stayed there, yeah. And [27:00] then Von Braun [27:03] decided we go a little bit further south. The Germans hadn't given up yet so there was still fighting and so we boarded the train again and went down to Garmisch-Partenkirchen [27:26] [phonetic] or something? Or what did the others tell

you?

INT: I know Garmisch is where folks ended up after the war, working a little bit with the British.

OH: No, but it wasn't that general area.

INT: The same?

OH: Bavaria [27:41].

INT: Dieter Grau [27:42] definitely, I think, mentioned going to Bavaria at the end.

OH: Yeah.

INT: Sounds familiar.

OH: Yes, in Bavaria, but I forgot the name of the village.

INT: You had mentioned that Von Braun [27:57] made the decision to move further south [28:00]. Was Von Braun with your group?

OH: Well, I tell you what. Von Braun always worked with the strong general, and that general's name was -- I forgot now what his name was. Just like he was with Medaris [28:21]. He needed -- they were -- he was very good at that. However, Von Braun [28:29] himself was an honorary SS [28:30]--

INT: Colonel?

OH: Colonel rank or something like that. And in that capacity he could commandeer those trains, you see.

INT: That's one thing that I don't know if you're familiar with or if you recall. I guess the General was also an SS [28:56] General?

OH: Not the one in Peenemünde [29:00].

INT: No? Okay. There was some concern that you all from Peenemünde would be associated

with the SS [29:06] and if captured you would be in big trouble.

OH: No.

INT: No? Okay.

OH: No. No SS there. No.

INT: But just to ask again, Von Braun [29:17] wasn't with your group that left in the train, was he?

OH: I think he was on the train. As a matter of fact, the train -- yes, I remember -- and the reason I -- I wouldn't believe it. I did not know that he had any connect -- —something with SS [29:36]. The train stopped halfway and it was Hitler's [29:42] birthday, which I think was April 1 or April 4 or something like that, and we all got out of the train. We assembled in this school auditorium [30:00], and who walked on the stage? In SS [30:05]. Von Braun [30:07]. I just couldn't believe it. And he said, "[speaks German] for the Fuhrer." [laughs]

INT: Wow.

OH: Yes, it was Hitler's [30:25] birthday. But he had to play the role.

INT: [affirmative]

OH: He had to play the role. I imagine personally he is a chameleon.

[laughter]

He was a chameleon. He knew how to tickle the military high brass and all that. He knew that.

INT: [affirmative]

OH: He even rode with President Kennedy after the moon shuttle [unintelligible] [31:00]. He was good at that.

INT: Do you know where you stopped? Where the train stopped --

[End of Tape 1A]

[Beginning of Tape 1B]

OH: We were then dispersed, and again by some authority we were given little slips that knew which farmer had maybe a room to -- you go there and you sleep there and you sleep there and they had a list of where we were. And then indeed the American troops moved in but there was no more shooting. But the Bavarians [00:40] -- see, I'm a Prussian, and it's a little bit like if you are from Mississippi, south Mississippi, and you tell a Texan something. And so we were not welcome [01:00] at all at that farmer.

[laughter]

But he had to overnight us, and we just stayed out of their way. But then the day came. The American Army moved in still in full battle gear and we were in the living rooms, sort of they kicked in the door -- they didn't knock -- they kicked in the door. And I was the first one. I had a machine gun on my chest. And they said, "You SS [01:38]?"

[laughter]

[gasps]

[laughter]

"No SS," I said. And I had English. I knew English. The farmers -- nobody else knew English. So I conversed with them. And I had [02:00] a little piece of -- I said, "May I? I have proof here." Okay, I gave him the proof and then he said, "Okay. Oh, we want eggs and beer." Then I was interpreter to these Bavarians [02:21] who didn't like me at all but now -- see, the girls. They were "oohh" [pretend crying]. They had never seen the likes of it. I said, in German then, I was their interpreter now, I said, "Do you bring

them beer [speaks German]?" Yeah, they went. They came back with two dozen eggs but no beer. Then there's the beer and the soldiers left. And I stayed one more day then another jeep came by and they said, "Mr. Holderer [03:00]?" "Yes?" "I have orders to please come with me." Very friendly. That's when we were -- they drove us to -- there was one other colleague. He drove us to a vacant -- I don't know what it was -- I think part of a hospital or some military installation and I think that was [unintelligible] one or the other. And we were interred there just about the whole -- a good part of the group -- whoever hid out in Bavaria [03:53] -- by the U.S. Air Force. And [04:00] Von Braun [04:03] was trying to negotiate, making deals with them, come over here, and the whole thing fell apart. What, about three months or something? And since I was technically speaking still a soldier [unintelligible] and that's all the U.S. authorities knew, so they had a special bus and I was bussed through a disembarkation or mustering out type camp and it was a very enjoyable affair. They had a Bavarian band playing for us -- the war had already --the bitterness had gone and we just had a good time [05:00] there for one day. Then they gave us money. It said in English and in German, "I am a good guy and nothing wrong has been found on me." I'm on my own but I had heard that there was some group in Witzenhausen [05:26] [phonetic] and those who were still interested in [unintelligible]. I made haste to get to Witzenhausen by what means don't ask me [laughs] -- there was no --

INT: Probably we want to go back a little bit and get some more details?

INT: Sure.

INT: Do you remember approximately what date you were mustered out?

OH: I have the papers in my cellar.

INT: Is it something we could take a look at?

OH: Yes.

INT: Later, later on.

OH: Yes.

INT: And you say you had a good time [06:00]. What made it a fun time?

OH: They had a Bavarian [06:06] band playing there, in other words the U.S. Army -- whoever was in charge of running this discharge stuff, running for the mill [phonetic] did not want any bitter feelings or something like that, so.

INT: So the Americans were friendly?

OH: We mingled freely with the soldiers that ran around and there obviously was a U.S. military installation there in charge of mustering out German soldiers.

INT: If we can even back up just another step to when you were -- not captured -- but when the Americans burst in and you got them the beer and eggs, were you in your Luftwaffe [06:57] uniform at this time?

OH: [negative] No.

INT: Okay [07:00].

OH: We were smart enough that when we arrived in that village, it was a youth hostel -- youth hostel?

INT: [affirmative]

OH: -- which was vacant, abandoned. But they had pieces of clothing here and there -- okay - - so I was in ordinary clothing. Yeah.

INT: Okay.

OH: It was ordinary.

INT: And there were others with you?

OH: There was --

INT: Others from Peenemünde [07:35] with you?

OH: There were about three or four or so. It was ever smaller [unintelligible] that were here but apparently Von Braun [07:49] -- don't want to say Von Braun but whoever he had working with him and all that -- they knew -- they talked to the Oberwachtmeister [phonetic] [08:00] and which house was assigned to whom and that's how that soldier knew [unintelligible].

INT: And when you went through this mustering out with the Bavarian [08:17] band and everything, was it a whole group of German soldiers?

OH: [affirmative] Oh yeah, it was all Germans there but I was probably among the thousands -
-

INT: Okay.

OH: -- maybe ten were from Peenemünde [08:32].

INT: Okay. That's exactly what I was going to ask. Okay.

OH: I don't know how many that ran through there, ten thousand. I don't know.

INT: And so immediately after you were mustered out, that's when you tried to get to Witzhausen [08:48]?

OH: Yes. When I tried on my own. Witzhausen.

INT: So you just heard by way of --

OH: By rumor, yes [09:00].

INT: -- that there were Peenemünde [09:02] engineers gathering in Witzhausen [09:05]?

OH: Yes. And there was some hope that the U.S. Army was interested. I mean, it was a

rumor that the Army was interested because they had captured all those V2's [09:20].

INT: In terms of time frame, are we assuming that Germany had surrendered by this point? I would think?

OH: Oh, yes. When did the war end?

INT: May of '45.

OH: Okay. Yes. Yes.

INT: So this mustering out likely happened sometime --

OH: -- May. So then from May to August thereabout I was with the Air Force in custody there. I had a good time. What they didn't know -- there were six barrels [10:00] of wine in the attic up there. [unintelligible].

INT: This --

OH: But we couldn't get out.

INT: So did you feel like you were prisoners?

OH: No. Detainees.

INT: Detainees. Okay. At any point when you were a detainee, were you questioned or interrogated about what you did during the war?

OH: The Air Force didn't talk to me at all. No.

INT: So, at this point, when you were detained by the Americans, did they have any idea that you had worked at Peenemünde [10:39]? Do you know?

OH: [affirmative]

INT: Oh, they did know?

OH: Oh, no, yeah. Von Braun [10:43] was there --

INT: Okay.

OH: -- and he tried hard to put all this charm [unintelligible] to make a deal to come to the United States. But, I don't know, General So-and-so and Washington back and forth [11:00]. They said no.

INT: So how do you know that Von Braun [11:06] was trying to make a deal? Did you find out later or did you know when you were there?

OH: I'm sure that's been on his mind immediately. I'm sure. He didn't tell me personally.

INT: Were you aware that Von Braun [11:23] was negotiating with the Americans at that time?

OH: I wouldn't call it negotiating. When you negotiate you assume you are sort of equal partners. He tried to persuade.

[laughter]

I guess. I said, "Wouldn't it be nice if we'd --" or something like that. I just visualize how that works. But obviously there must have been [12:00] an initial interest by the Air Force or there wouldn't have -- I don't know what the rank of the officer there was, and there was MPs, too.

INT: Was Von Braun [12:17] at the same location that you were, and how do you know that? Did you see him?

OH: See, I was really not -- know what, I shook hands with Von Braun [12:37] when he came here for me to build a model for him. That's the only time I personally had a personal contact with Von Braun. I was not one of his close collaborators.

INT: But you have a feeling that Von Braun [12:57] was at the facility that you were being held [13:00] at the same time.

OH: Now that you ask me that question, I cannot answer for sure.

INT: Okay. There's a famous photograph showing Von Braun [13:13] after he was captured

where his arm was in a cast.

OH: Yes.

INT: Do you know anything about that?

OH: Yes. He was in a car crash because his driver fell asleep. I think he was en route from Peenemünde [13:30] to Berlin [13:31]. And apparently he had private cars -- and I read that somewhere -- and the automobile was a Tata, I think. I had never heard of it. Well, it's a rare car which is now being built in India. I think it's Tata [14:00]. Anyway that's where he got hurt. Broken.

INT: So can you describe how you ended up getting -- at this point, chronologically, you were able to get yourself to Witzhausen [14:20]?

OH: By what means I -- buses, hitching rides --

INT: Yeah. So you got to Witzhausen and that must have been a sort of reunion of sorts, was it, with lots of Peenemünde [14:34] folks? Or were there other people there?

OH: Well, Witzhausen [14:39] was a sizeable city. They were not swarming with V2 [14:46] people. I had to hunt --

INT: Okay.

OH: -- for until I finally found --and the interesting thing there was that there was a lawyer [15:00] in the group at that time. His name was Axel, A-X-E-L. And his wife was the type that likes to have important jobs. And she kept book on who was in Witzhausen [15:21] and all that stuff, and through her I could get quarters. And the homeowners in Witzhausen [15:37] loved to have us because they already had -- the Army was already very much in contact with some people, I don't know. But anyway, if any of us moved into that house the owner of the house [16:00] got a sign hung on the door, "Off limits."

And that means -- that was -- because at that time some of the soldiers were still marauding a little bit, you know? Like any soldier, they'd get drunk and kick in doors and see if there were girls inside or something. But then if one of us was a resident in that house, the landlord got a sign, "Off limits." So that was --

[laughter]

-- weird.

INT: And so did you do anything in Witzenhausen [16:47] related to the rocket program, or was that just a -- you just kind of bided your time --

OH: Bide my time. However, I was -- I always [17:00] took advantage of opportunities. I had a camera. And I had a lady who was also on that train -- she knew that big box full of photographic equipment was mine and I got it -- and I could develop and make prints. And pretty close to where I lived, was quartered, there was a headquarters of a U.S. company of soldiers and I befriended the Master Sergeant. And I -- we were just like this -- and I took pictures when they had roll call and then I gave them -- and then they ordered and I let them pay me in cigarettes because even money [inaudible]. And I was rich [18:00].

[laughter]

INT: That's great.

OH: [unintelligible] cigarettes.

INT: And so what happened after Witzenhausen [18:10]? Did you go somewhere else, or what's the next series of events?

OH: Well, let's see. In Witzenhausen [18:23] it was finally decided yes, we will go to USA and I told you initially 100. And I was always eager to go. I was eager to go -- come to

America as a youngster. I would have like to but that was -- many kids have dreams. Anyway, the decision was made, "Okay, 120. [unintelligible]." Now, our next question is, okay [19:00], and we were told we were going to be given a contract for six months and we would be given a junior officer's per diem -- in the United States I think \$6. Well what I physically got in hand was \$6 because it was actually \$9, but they took out so much for quarters and food so that's what it was. But the families -- see that was the big stumbling block in there -- the families were promised adequate quarters and rations. The average German at that time got 800 calories of ration stamps. And the families were promised [20:00] 2,600 calories per day. So that was not good because when the women came after a year they were all fat.

[laughter]

Well, most of them. Not my wife. Not my wife.

[laughter]

INT: In fact, if you wouldn't mind, when did you marry your wife? During the war sometime?

OH: Yes.

INT: Okay.

OH: Yes. In '45. Early. Yes.

INT: And was --

OH: I was in Peenemünde [20:37] and had leave. Married.

INT: Was she with you in Witzhausen [20:44]?

OH: No.

INT: Okay.

OH: She was in Berlin [20:49]. And that was a big problem because she was in the East

Germany and the Russians already had barbed wire [21:00] that you could not cross from East Germany by that time. They only had certain points for crossing this path. I had to arrange -- see, I didn't want to leave Witzhausen [21:18] in order not to lose my chance to be with the group. So with my cigarettes and a box of coffee and all the riches I had -- I heard there was a guy who went over the border and get notes from other people over and he knew how to do it. Well, I gave him all the money but I was the only one, so he had about -- he was -- well, he went over and he kept his promise in so far as he actually contacted her in a very obscure [22:00] village in East Germany where she was hiding out. And at least she got my letter. I said, "This guy is okay. Come with him, I'm here. Urgent. Love you." But at least it set her in motion. And her father was a hunter and he knew the forest, when to duck and when not to duck and all that. And so they made it on their own to that border crossing and he talked to a forester. See, in Germany the forester pick clean. There are no cigarette butts.

[laughter]

You're in the Park Service. You know what --

INT: That's right. We know about that.

OH: You know what the cleanest city is? Singapore [23:00]. You know why? Very simple.

They have civilian non-uniformed, what do you call it, like police -- you couldn't tell it's a police man.

INT: Undercover?

OH: Undercover. Every fifteenth person undercover. If he'd see somebody drop a cigarette.

But you have to be undercover, you see. And that does the trick. But you see, we don't like this undercover here, but that's what you should do in the Park Service. Go

undercover.

INT: I'll make a note.

[laughter]

OH: Have a few undercover. My badge. "Pick that up and we have a nice day for you overnight."

[laughter]

I tell you, it works [24:00].

[laughter]

INT: I've got it written down. Before we go forward I want to go back and ask him some questions --

OH: Singapore.

INT: Sorry to go back a second -- when you were leaving Peenemünde [24:14], could you take things with you?

OH: [affirmative]

INT: Were you taking any documents or equipment with you?

OH: Nothing of that nature.

INT: Okay, so nothing -- you didn't try to hide --

OH: Somebody probably -- I was not in charge of logistics or anything of that sort.

INT: Okay.

OH: I'm pretty sure that they packed up stuff and took it somewhere. I don't know where.

INT: Did you hear about hiding any records or equipment?

OH: No, I did not.

INT: Were you instructed not to talk about what you did at Peenemünde [24:51]?

OH: No.

INT: No? No instructions?

OH: No.

INT: Okay.

INT: From the time you left [25:00] -- from the time you went into hiding and left Peenemünde [25:03] and were working on the missiles -- from that time until you came to the United States, so just after the war, did you do any work on rockets whatsoever? Nothing. So there's a six or eight month period --

OH: Come to think of it, the five years I spent in Fort Bliss [25:23] I didn't work on any missiles either.

[laughter]

Why is there was just no money to fund anything of significance. We were just sitting there looking at old drawings and the Army had hired about an equal number of GE employees. And we were sitting there with them and we'd look at the drawings. They yawned. "I don't know where this went" -- they thought [26:00] the GE people could absorb the rocket knowledge --

[laughter]

-- by infusion or being contacting. That didn't work, and there was, to my knowledge that is, I didn't work on anything -- weaponry.

INT: So nothing with engineering or anything in Germany after the war? You didn't do anything --

OH: In Germany?

INT: In Germany, nothing?

OH: No.

INT: So there was this six or eight month period or so in there, from the end of the war until when you came to the United States, where you didn't really do much of anything.

OH: Not much of anything. Just staying alive and get food and -- yeah.

INT: Do you know how you made this list of 120 people?

OH: I do not know who made it exactly [27:00], but I'm pretty sure this guy named Mr. Patt [27:05] whom I mentioned who was in that picture with the Raumschiffahrt [27:09] people, who worked with Von Braun [27:11] way back and near Berlin [27:15] when rocketry, you might say, got started as a private enterprise at that time.

INT: How did you spell his last name?

OH: P-A-T-T.

INT: Okay.

OH: His first name is Kurt. K-U-R-T. Kurt Patt [27:34].

INT: And did he ultimately -- he came to the United States as well?

OH: He -- yes. He was -- in Peenemünde [27:55] he was actually my boss.

INT: Oh, okay.

OH: I mean, he was a civilian [28:00]. He was never in the Army. He was not a soldier employee. But he quit here and went to California to work for Lockheed I think.

INT: Okay.

OH: [affirmative]

INT: So could you talk -- we have another minute or so before we need to change our tapes.

OH: Yes.

INT: How did you -- where did you leave from? You went from Witzhausen [28:35] and

then where did you go after that? You had found out you were going to the United States? Everything was signed?

OH: Well, as I said, my wife finally was able to --

INT: Right.

OH: -- join me, and they had to cross the border from East to West clandestinely and the Russian guard was asleep. They tiptoed across [29:00]. But I had a son about six months old, maybe, and they hoped he wouldn't do what babies do. And then the American soldier about a hundred feet apart was also dozing, but only halfway asleep. And they were about thirty feet over and they thought they had it made and then he screamed, "Halt!"

[laughter]

And then they started running. They couldn't get far enough away. Then he went, "Poof!" Shot over there -- a warning shot. And then they started their story with -- that softened him -- "Baby, hospital, baby, hospital, sick." They couldn't speak English [30:00] well enough, just "hospital" and "baby" and all of it. And then finally the soldier said, "Ah."

[laughter]

And so they ran. And then they actually ended up in Witzenhausen [30:16] and we were there maybe for a month or two. But see, by that time I already knew that I was among them. So the next big question was where do we house the women because we wanted to know -- the ones selected wanted to know that they're not in just barracks. And we stopped in one place and that was -- what they had done, it was like, what do you call this, subsidized things here --

INT: Like subsidized housing?

OH: Yeah. These [31:00] --

INT: Public housing?

OH: Public housing, subsidizing --

INT: They call them the projects.

OH: Projects. They simply -- the Americans simply evicted them. Then the train moved in and they evicted them without leaving furniture. And we was inspecting and no good.

No good. Unacceptable. I don't know who -- I never talked to anybody but it must have been at some level that said no that is unacceptable --

[End of Tape 1B]

[Beginning of Tape 2A]

INT: -- April 23, 2010. This is an oral history interview as part of the National Park Service Fort Hunt Oral History Project. We are here interviewing former NASA engineer, Mr. Oscar Holderer, here at his home in Huntsville, Alabama. This is Brandon Bies with the National Park Service. Also joined by Vincent Santucci of the National Park Service. And with that, Mr. Holderer, where we left off on the last tape you had talked a little bit about, I guess, your wife and child were kicked out of their housing area, the public housing area?

OH: No, no, no, no, no. The 120 who had been selected --

INT: [affirmative]

OH: -- were on a train [01:00] --

INT: Oh, okay.

OH: -- including their families.

INT: Oh, the families were on the train, too? Okay.

OH: And the families were promised adequate quarters in Germany while we were in the USA to fulfill a one-half year contract. And the first stop was what we would call here a project. The U.S. authorities had evicted all the people there, leaving furniture behind. And some of us, I don't think I even went down in there, just milled around some, looked at them and that's when I said, "Inadequate." And so back into the train [02:00]. Then we ended up in Landshut [02:05] and there the quarters were nice. Little houses -- I think they used to be also German military quarters for officers or something, I don't know. I have no idea where they housed, but they were nice, but had no furniture. But the Army delivered the basics, including bedbugs.

[laughter]

So my wife had a problem with bedbugs. And by that time I was already here and I got letters and she wrote me about the bedbugs. And then she went [03:00] -- this housing complex, they had a small administrative office -- a serge and maybe a good tenant or so [laughs] and she says, "We have bedbugs in this furniture." "No problem!" They cleaned with DDT at that time. All gone! Then, see, they weren't all gone.

INT: Right.

OH: She took a clothespin and caught one with the legs still twiggling.

INT: [laughs]

OH: She went into the office and said, "Here! Bedbugs [04:00]!"

[laughter]

And then they did it right. They had the terminator over there, everything was sealed. They had to live in a hotel for a week and they fumigated the place. So, I mean, they

were well taken care of, in other words--

INT: So you never, yourself, though, lived in Landshut [04:31].

OH: [negative]

INT: Okay. You just -- did you even go there? Or you were there, they got dropped off, and then you came to the United States?

OH: It was that fast.

INT: Okay.

OH: It was that fast. I know I boarded an Army truck -- it was a canvas then benches inside -- and we rode to Le Havre, [05:00] where we boarded a ship. The ship was mostly occupied with returning soldiers. U.S. soldiers. And we were given, I don't know -- it wasn't up to Queen Elizabeth's --

[laughter]

-- but it was built for Army transport. It had a mess hall and bunk beds. The seas were a little -- it was just a small ship. But I didn't get seasick and as far as I know I mingled with the GI's. Talked to them [06:00] -- they know I was German I had a strong accent I am pretty sure.

INT: And this is going way back but we never asked. When did you pick up English? Where did you learn to speak English?

OH: I had four years in school. High school. And I had eight years of Latin. But I didn't realize that if you learned Latin it helps you to learn English. A lot of -- English is half Latin and half Germanic.

INT: And so when you were on the boat, you said you seemed to have gotten along well with the Americans?

OH: Yes. Yes. Now one moment I cried. I was so emotionally touched -- I couldn't [07:00] tell the story, I could almost still cry. When we crossed the Statue of Liberty. They had these fire boats spouting red, white, and blue. And what was most impressive, there was a singing group, the Andrews Sisters. They were on a tugboat with huge loud speakers. They sang, "Sentimental Journey Home."

[laughter]

[cries] [08:00] [unintelligible] It was meant for me.

[laughter]

"Sentimental Journey Home." And I had many records of the Andrews Sisters. They sang so beautifully. And it was -- yeah. I'm not to cry but this [unintelligible]. Can you picture this?

INT: Can you give us more details? Were you on top of the deck?

OH: On top of the deck with all the other soldiers lined up and waving. They sang "Sentimental Journey Home" and I understood every word and it was just so touching [09:00]. Even though -- at this moment I thought it was for me, sort of like that.

[laughter]

Entering, there's no words. It overwhelmed me. Went from then, pretty quickly we went -- ushered into -- we had to walk a ways, I know that. We were maybe a group of a dozen or so and one was a fairly high in our -- other guy had a chip on his shoulder with the Germans -- stiff and he thought he was something special. And he -- I was "eh" [10:00] and I held my photographic equipment in the box and he walks [unintelligible] of New York and he had the attaché briefcase and I had carried that box and he was ashamed to be -- everybody walked a few feet away from me because I was carrying that

big wooden box with my photo stuff in there. And then we boarded Pullman train.

INT: When you were on the ship on your way across the Atlantic --

OH: Yes.

INT: -- were there Americans assigned to your group?

OH: Probably so but I don't really remember who it was. It wasn't -- I think a Lieutenant.

INT: Okay.

OH: I think a Lieutenant but he didn't [11:00] -- I don't recall giving us specific orders. He informed us where the mess hall is.

INT: Sure.

OH: We stood in line and got our chow.

INT: Okay.

OH: Now we did not sleep with GI's -- I think we had our cubbyholes lower -- I'm pretty sure, yeah. But aboard the ship, I don't think we were restricted like fenced off from -- I don't think so.

INT: Since you had the camera equipment with you, was there any possibility that you took photos on the ship?

OH: I did not, no. I did not.

INT: And you didn't photograph the Andrews sisters?

OH: I did not. I talked about that box [12:00] -- coming to think of it, it may have been shipped as baggage, and I --

INT: Couldn't get to it.

OH: -- didn't have it in my possession. I got it when they unload ships similar to the airports used to be before they had these carousels -- put all the suitcases and then, "Oh, this one's

mine.”

INT: When the Americans saw the Statue of Liberty and saw the red, white, and blue water coming from the boats and hearing the Andrews Sisters, did they cheer? Did they sing? Did they --

OH: They were occasional outburst, “Yay!” or something like that.

INT: Were there Americans that were watching from New York [12:55]?

OH: Could have been. That’s right from here to downtown Huntsville [13:00]. That water’s wide.

INT: Yeah, sure.

OH: I don’t know. I do not recall a big reception when the boat finally docked. I don’t know.

INT: Were the Andrews sisters on a boat or were --

OH: Boat.

INT: They were on a boat?

OH: On a tugboat with four speakers. They had these big horn type speakers and they sit there singing and waving and singing and waving. Apparently it must have been one boat after another coming in, then the next boat and the next boat or something like that, I don’t know.

INT: So I guess the boat must have been listing to one side.

[laughter]

OH: Well, perhaps a little bit.

[laughter]

INT: What time of day was it [14:00] when the boat finally actually docked in New York [14:05]? Was it night time or was it day time?

OH: Day time. It was day time.

INT: Okay. And did you --

OH: I think afternoon.

INT: Did your group from Peenemünde [14:15] all -- did you get off first before the Americans or after the Americans got off?

OH: Probably after.

INT: Okay.

OH: Probably after. I just don't know.

INT: Do you recall if there was media there or press, photographers?

OH: I don't recall and probably wasn't.

INT: Okay. And, again, the group that you were with on the boat of Peenemünde [14:51] folks, was it solely Peenemünde engineers and scientists or were there other scientists [15:00] and people mixed in?

OH: To the best of my knowledge only a dozen Peenemünde's [15:07] or Raumschiffahrt [15:08].

INT: Only a dozen?

OH: Something like that.

INT: So the rest of them were not from Peenemünde? Or this -- or only a dozen people. You only remember about a dozen people.

OH: In our group. They shipped only, something like a dozen per boat or something.

INT: Okay.

OH: As far as I know.

INT: Okay. But of that group they were all from Peenemünde [15:27]. There weren't other

scientists from other --

OH: To the best of my knowledge, yes.

INT: Okay.

OH: Yes. Because we were all headed to Fort Bliss [15:38].

INT: Right.

OH: And Fort Bliss had only -- it was the only place where they had rocket people.

INT: Do you remember the names of any of the German engineers who were with you [16:00]?

OH: No, couldn't say. It was not Mr. Patt [16:08] whom I mentioned before because there was a small group with tons and tons of documents that were shipped with that small group -- and Mr. Patt [16:30] was among them -- at the first shipment [unintelligible] and they accompanied that shipment to Fort Bliss [16:41]. And I was maybe -- they were there maybe two, three weeks before I came.

INT: Okay. And so what happened after you got off the boat? Did you have to walk somewhere or get on a bus or a train?

OH: We walked certain distances [17:00] more than likely, had a bus to some degree but I do know that I remember the walking because I had to carry my box. That's why I know we walked a certain distance -- Pullman -- to the train, Pullman train. And it was an Army officer was with us but we were not handcuffed or anything like that.

INT: Any idea the date that you arrived in New York [17:35]?

OH: The date? No, I sure don't have it in my memory but I wonder if I had any documents -- no because we were completely bypassed by immigration or anything, no bother at all. You see [18:00], usually when you come into the United States -- passport, visa --

[negative] the Army took care of everything. It was still wartime. The President -- well, the whole Paperclip [18:19] was by Eisenhower [18:21] -- and he could do so under the War Powers Act [18:25]. Congress had given him unusual powers and this is one of his privileges that he used, the War Powers Act [18:40]. I don't think Obama could do the same right now.

[laughter]

INT: And so where did you go on the train?

OH: We boarded in New York [18:56] and ended up in El Paso [18:57]. I [19:00] do not know if we had to change trains one time or not.

INT: So you --

OH: Trains were the transportation.

INT: So as far as you recall you remember going straight from New York [19:18] to El Paso [19:19].

OH: Exactly.

INT: You don't have any recollection of going to Boston [19:23]?

OH: No, no. Maybe. You say that Fort Strong [19:30] business.

INT: Yes.

OH: No, I do not recall that.

INT: The records show that you went -- at least according to the records, they show that you went to Fort Strong [19:41] in Boston [19:42] for a couple of weeks.

OH: A couple of weeks?

INT: [affirmative] And then went from there to El Paso [19:49].

OH: Could be.

INT: But you don't have any recollection?

OH: No. No Andrews Sisters there so that was --.

[laughter]

INT: Let's give you a couple of hints. There was an island [20:00], a small island, that had a lighthouse on it. That you would take a boat to go.

OH: You're not talking about Ellis Island [20:12], are you?

INT: No.

INT: No. This was in --

OH: Ellis Island is now also a --

INT: Yes, it's a National Park.

OH: Yeah, yeah. My memory has lapses.

INT: That's okay. Your memory with everything else was spectacular. According to the paperwork -- and we'll give you copies of this when we're done here -- the group of you came into New York [20:42], boarded trains, actually went to Boston [20:46] for a very short time first where there was some additional processing, filling out of questionnaires, paperwork -- and then from there going to El Paso [21:00].

OH: I wonder if that applied to our -- see, we came in spurts as I said, 12 people or so. Because these more serious processing took place in Fort Bliss [21:19]. We had to pass investigation of were you a Nazi [21:26], how big a Nazi were you, and all that stuff. But that happened at Fort Bliss. I don't think Fort Strong [21:37] had the records yet to say what's the war criminals or something -- I don't think they've had records at that time, or sufficient records. I doubt it, I mean I don't know.

INT: At any point prior to Fort Bliss [21:57] had you been questioned [22:00] about if you

were a Nazi [22:02] or anything like that?

OH: No.

INT: So they didn't even ask you any of that before you got to Fort Bliss?

OH: No, no.

INT: Okay.

INT: Other than when you had a machine gun at your belly.

OH: Well, that was -- that has nothing to do with [inaudible].

[laughter]

INT: After that time, nobody ever asked you, "Are you pro-Nazi [22:24]/anti-Nazi?"

OH: No.

INT: No.

OH: Well, when I was discharged from the military --

INT: Okay.

OH: -- I'm pretty sure I filled out form but -- correctly -- I was never a member of the Nazi [22:38] party, no.

INT: Okay. I want to try to ask another question, again, to try to pick your brain and get another hint or clue. Do you remember where you had Thanksgiving dinner? Where you had Thanksgiving when you first came here? Presumably Thanksgiving [23:00] was a new holiday for you -- you had never -- they didn't have Thanksgiving in Germany.

OH: No. They had Erntedank Fest but that was smaller. You're right. In Fort Bliss [23:33], right? When did I get into Fort Bliss?

INT: According to the records that we have, and you know the records aren't always right --

OH: Yeah.

INT: -- it would have been in early December.

OH: I think that's right. That sounds okay [24:00].

INT: We --

OH: I could verify -- I wrote sort of a little autobiography at one time when my mind was still clearer so I may have a few dates

INT: Okay.

OH: Yes, sir. That sounds about right. Yes, it was right.

INT: I might, again, in one final attempt to pick your memory, I've got a document to give you. And we can leave this with you. This is dated November 30th of 1945. And you see it's dated -- it's from --

OH: There's me. Oscar.

INT: There's you, right. And there is Boston [24:54], Massachusetts.

OH: Yes.

INT: P.O. Box 2276 [24:58]. And see Fort Strong [24:59] right there?

OH: Yes [25:00].

INT: So there's Boston and the orders say, "The following named civilian employees, German, will proceed on or about 3rd December, 1945, from this station, by rail, to Fort Bliss [25:16], Texas."

OH: Okay.

INT: And there's the listing of -- according to this paperwork, you were with this whole group here that all went from Fort Strong [25:26] down to Fort Bliss [25:30].

OH: In one scoop?

INT: According to this, all this group.

OH: Okay.

INT: And you'll notice, according to this, Hans Fichtner [26:19] was part of that group --

OH: Yes.

INT: -- and Rudy Schlidt [26:22] but also Magnus von Braun [25:23] --

OH: Magnus.

INT: You remember any of those people being with you?

OH: Let me see. The one that I said who didn't like that I carried a box.

[laughter] [26:00]

Walter Wiesemann [26:08] was the youngest, I believe.

INT: Oh, okay.

OH: Vandersee [Fritz] [26:24] was one of those -- was a plumber. A plumber man.

INT: What was the name?

OH: Vandersee. He was a technician. Craftsman. Geissler [Ernst] [26:54] was my boss here in NASA [26:58].

INT: Can you repeat the name [27:00]?

OH: Geissler.

INT: Dr. Geissler. So he ended up being your boss here at NASA [27:06].

OH: Yes. He was my boss. Yeah. I don't see that guy on here. So we were -- oh, per diem -- here's my \$6. So the \$6 is right.

INT: Right!

OH: [unintelligible commentary]. I didn't know there were that many at one time, but it's okay.

INT: That's for you to keep.

OH: Oh! For me to keep.

INT: Sure. And we're going to give you some other documents here as well [28:00].

OH: Well, I hadn't really collected much.

INT: That's okay. We'd rather you be honest with us than make something up. So that's fine.

OH: Now that was restricted -- that's not very hard classification.

INT: [affirmative]

OH: [unintelligible commentary] I know that our commanding officer in Fort Bliss [28:31] was Hamill [28:32] [phonetic].

INT: Hamill?

OH: [affirmative]

INT: We have a number of documents to give you that Hamill signed.

OH: Yes.

INT: A lot of the questionnaires that went on in 1946 and 1947 about Nazi [28:45] party membership and what not, Hamill [28:47] had to sign a lot of that. And we have copies of all of that to give you.

OH: And the interesting part was Xerox today -- you go to a machine and copy [29:00] -- there was no such thing at that time. But there would have been. In El Paso [29:09] they had a store for -- they used microfilm and then actually made another page. And Oscar said, "There's money in that business." [laughs] And because everybody had to submit any documents, especially these [speaks German], that means the soldiers records -- it was a little book like this -- page one some of them had -- and I was befriended with an American guy named Kirkland [phonetic] and he was a GE group. And I photographed all these documents [30:00] and Mr. Rogic [phonetic] who was our lab director, big guy -

- I'm surprised I didn't see his name here -- but anyway the two of us and my wife had a darkroom. And I photographed these things and I had a rubber stamp made, "This is to certify that it's a true copy" and we'd charge them. And so I had good money. More than the \$6. And my colleague, Mr. Rogic, he did all the collecting and passing out and Hamill's [20:45] office, they didn't squawk about it -- "Where did you get this?" And Mr. Kirkland, he was one of my friends and he signed. I wonder those things didn't [31:00] --

INT: I don't know that we have those. We'll show you here in a second some of the things we do have, but I don't think what we have was produced by you.

OH: Okay.

INT: At least I don't think that's in the National Archives.

OH: Okay.

INT: If it was it'd be pretty important I would guess, so.

[laughter]

OH: Well, I don't know how long photographic paper like this would last. National Archives. There must be -- where's that?

INT: They're in Washington, D.C. So that piece of paper right there -- that's a copy from the National Archives in Washington.

[End of Tape 2A]

[Beginning of Tape 2B]

INT: Do you ever remember meeting Hamill [00:04] before Fort Bliss [00:06]?

OH: I do not.

INT: Okay. And what was Hamill's role from what you understand?

OH: He was the highest ranking officer of that Beaumont Hospital annex which was barbed-wired in. That's where we worked and slept. And it had a cafeteria. And we were -- supposedly we were not to leave the camp. Now, it was -- if anybody wanted to escape we just go under the chain-link fence and crawl out, and one guy did [01:00].

INT: Really?

OH: Vandersee [01:02]. The one I just mentioned. He needed a woman. And he made it to somewhere and then they caught him.

[laughter]

INT: And which name was that?

OH: I think that was the guy. I saw it. Here. Vandersee. Fritz Vandersee [01:33]. That's the only case I'm aware of where somebody sneaked out of the camp --

INT: Fritz Vandersee. Okay.

OH: That's the only case I remember where sneaked out --

INT: When they brought him back --

OH: Yes?

INT: Did they bring him back?

OH: He couldn't exist in the outside for long.

[laughter]

INT: Did he have any punishment?

OH: Not that I'm aware of [02:00]. I just heard rumor-wise that that happened. I'm pretty sure that Hammill [02:03] gave him a good scolding.

[laughter]

Beyond that I don't know.

INT: So can you summarize for us then -- what did you do at Fort Bliss [02:18]? Did you go to White Sands [02:20]?

OH: No.

INT: No?

OH: As a matter of fact I never was at White Sands.

INT: Okay.

OH: Because I -- only people who know how to fire the V2 [02:35], adjust the dials right. You're probably well aware that among [unintelligible] they fired them into U.S. territory desert land. But one of them -- I don't know by mischief or technical flaw -- shot into Mexico. Did you know that?

INT: No.

OH: Oh, you didn't [03:00]?

INT: No.

OH: Well one, instead of going north it went south and the U.S. had to apologize to Mexico. But it was a boon to Mexico because it made a big hole in the desert somewhere. And before you know enchiladas for sale, it was a tourist [unintelligible].

[laughter]

That's what I heard.

INT: So when you were at Fort Bliss [03:30], were they launching the missiles from White Sands [03:34]?

OH: Yes.

INT: Okay. So not --

OH: I never seen it.

INT: So you never saw it. What did you do for the four or so years that you were at Fort Bliss [03:43]?

OH: Talked to GE people, drew my own house plans --

INT: Plans for this house?

OH: -- twiddled my thumbs [04:00]. There was no project in that sense that I'm aware of. Some people worked on something for -- to pass time I guess.

INT: You mentioned GE people. What were GE people? You mean General Electric?

OH: General Electric Company had a contract to send about an equal number. We were roughly equal in numbers.

INT: Okay.

OH: Oh, I was befriended. Yes. My best friend was Timmy Ford and he taught my wife how to drive a car because they say husbands are poor driver teachers for women -- for wives. Husbands should not do that. And he did. He taught her. I bought a '36 Ford for \$600 which was exactly [05:00] the same price that the original owner had paid.

[laughter]

And many of my colleagues -- I was one of the first ones who had a car. But I purposely bought one that was simple. No automatic transmission. They were barely invented -- automatic transmissions. And I bought this, and they were all lemons.

[laughter]

And that triggered me to start an automotive repair shop there.

INT: On the base?

OH: On the base. But that was in the last year when we already had full access to downtown. Soon as the wives came -- we had a card that said, "This person is [06:00] permitted to be

here and exist,” or something like that. “If there’s any trouble, call this number.” That’s all we had, no picture, no nothing. Just a card with a telephone number on it.

INT: So could you talk about, a little bit, when your wife and your son -- you had a child at this time?

OH: My wife was lucky. They didn’t want to send them all in one big bunch, so in Landshut [06:39] they picked numbers out of a hat and my wife picked a very low number. She was on the first shipment.

INT: Oh, wow.

OH: She came here before Christmas, and this Mrs. Axel, I mentioned who was sort of the bookkeeper [07:00] or manipulator in Witzenhausen [07:02], she said, “Oh, Mrs. Holderer.” She wanted to talk her out of that low number. She said, “You don’t know the conditions you’re going into. There’s nothing on paper.” And my wife said, “Even if I have to live in a tent, I go to my husband.” And that’s how -- and my wife and my son - - they came over.

INT: Did any other family come over? Any of your parents or your wife’s parents?

OH: My mother came over.

INT: Your mother did?

OH: Because she was a widow and she lived many happy years here.

INT: Did she come over at the same time?

OH: Same time, yes.

INT: Okay.

OH: Same time. Yes. We had the privilege [08:00] of saying whom we want. Now, I don’t know -- I don’t know it would go down to nephews/nieces, but I think parents, wives, and

children were allowed.

INT: Okay. Okay. And so then how did it come about that you and all of the group was going to go -- was going to leave Fort Bliss [08:28]? That happened around 1950 or so, is that correct?

OH: Exactly. What I understand -- it was evident that this Fort Bliss [08:46] environment was not suitable to do serious rocket development work, even though the Cold War had not begun. But it was [09:00] a lukewarm war beginning, and there was enough money to start serious rocket projects -- Pershing [09:14], Redstone [09:16] -- and there were many abandoned arsenals in the country, and Von Braun [09:29] and some high-ranking army officer or officers and I don't know what, visited several such installations. Sort of made a quickie tour. And I don't know which -- at one time I knew where it is they went but I don't know right now. Anyway, they picked Redstone Arsenal [09:58] which was a chemical arsenal [10:00]. And they had -- when my first office here was in an abandoned officer's club --

[laughter]

-- my first office -- as I told you when we arrived here I -- from my various activity and I had built a house in the past which I was able to sell quickly, and I had -- I was the richest guy in town among the Germans. And I bought -- immediately I contacted the real estate guy. Well, I had to rent some. I had so much stuff already I had the lathe, welding equipment [11:00], photographic stuff, I had this bench and stuff, and we were only allowed one thousand pounds. So I contacted my friends, the GE people, who had no such limitations, and this one grabbed this and this one -- and I myself bought a four-wheel farm trailer from Sears and Roebuck and a Jeep. A brand-new Jeep. And that

four-wheel farm trailer wasn't really meant for interstate travel --but that didn't exist anyway, you know.

INT: Right.

OH: But I had to make the trip from El Paso [11:51] to here no faster than 35 miles, or the thing would fishtail.

[laughter]

INT: So you were [12:00] probably the last one to arrive here then.

OH: I don't really remember. There was no critical date I had to report.

INT: Sure. And so could you just then kind of summarize for us what you did and what projects you worked on here in Huntsville over your 30 or so years working here?

OH: I know I built the transporter for the Pershing [12:34] because I have a big photograph of it somewhere, where I was standing in front of it, the Pershing, on the transporter. This big prototype. It was a carriage. Few odds and ends but then [13:00] fate had it that I sort of got into the aerodynamics business, and they needed a wind tunnel model. But fortunately I could -- there was a guy there, an American engineer who -- we had already mixed by that time -- they had hired people -- who was a good aerodynamicist. And together we designed quite a few wind tunnel models. And then later on I designed this fourteen-inch trisonic wind tunnel. A big thing. And McGarreth [phonetic] was our boss, our commanding officer [14:00], and at that time there existed a Watertown Arsenal [14:08]. Have you heard of it?

INT: Watertown Arsenal?

OH: Yeah.

INT: [affirmative]

OH: And there were wonderful work because they were the Army's cannon division and nobody wanted the cannon anymore, you see? There were all these 54-year-old and 60-year-old super technicians -- I mean, machinery you wouldn't believe. And they were -- so the whole wind tunnel was built up there because they wouldn't have had the money here. Sort of [unintelligible]. General Medaris arranged for them to do that. It was nice.

INT: [affirmative] And did you do any work with NASA [15:00] in terms of the space program or anything like that? Or were you strictly with missiles and then wind tunnels?

OH: Yes, indirectly, wind tunnel. This covers a lot of stuff. Panel flutter -- when you have missile that's shooting up, there's a framework and then thin metal and then at certain speeds you worry about panel flutter and being destructive. But anything, what they called force models, which an internal [unintelligible] and pressure models. That's a model, depending on the tunnel we wanted to test, and some were this big -- for our tunnels they were about this big and had teeny holes in this connected with two pressure gauges and then around the tunnel [16:00] certain angles of pitch and then it gets pretty detailed.

INT: And then when did you retire? Did you retire and go into private industry?

OH: I retired after the moonshot [16:15]. Maybe that's something I shouldn't say but it was my belief that Boeing and all these big contractors who made components for the moonshot [16:30], for the rocket, they were kept under a lot of tight technical supervision. As a matter of fact, there were enough people here who almost replicated the design in redundancy. And there were zillions of meetings, "Why would you put that over there?" And after the moonshot [17:00], that's my interpretation, these big contractors had a big lobby that said, "We did not like the way they treated us." That's

the moonshot [17:20]. That's not for publication.

[laughter]

INT: That's outside of our general scope of interest, anyway.

OH: Okay. And I sent a guy named as head of the Marshall Space Flight Center [17:37] by the name of Petrone [17:39].

IN: Okay.

OH: And his task, in my opinion, was to disassemble, specifically de-Germanize, the center. It took him a whole year [18:00]. In civil service you had rules. There was a rift going on at the same time and so they offered me another position, same salary. I had made it - - I told you I got that -- well, I was a super grade when I retired, 16. You know, GS -- are you civil servants?

INT: Yes.

OH: You are GS something, right?

INT: We are GS.

OH: I was a GS-16. That's what they call a super-grade.

INT: Okay.

OH: Didn't make any more money than a GS-15 which was 20 years of service or something like that but [19:00] GS-16 and above, the number is controlled by Congress. So I was extremely surprised when my boss handed me a promotion to a GS-16. It was more of an honor than it made a monetary difference. So that's really -- I mean, I'm amazed. I'm amazed. But anyway, I took the opportunity to say -- I had 25 years and I was almost 55. And if you're 55 then you don't have an age penalty if you retire early. You know that, right?

INT: He's closer to retiring than I am.

OH: Oh! But remember [20:00], 25 years and you have to be 55. Then you can quit. Well you can work longer and have more years. The reason I had 25 -- I really didn't have 25 work years but they count your sick leave, your unused sick leave. And I had a year and a half of unused sick leave. That put me over.

INT: And so did you retire?

OH: Oh yes. I retired.

INT: And what year would that have been? Around 1975 or so?

OH: Yes, I think so. I think so.

INT: Okay. And so have you been retired ever since? Did you pick up a second job?

OH: Yes.

INT: Okay.

OH: I designed quite a bit of -- a lot of stuff [21:00] for the space center. The museum.

INT: Oh, okay.

OH: You said you had been there?

INT: We might be going there later this afternoon.

OH: Well, you better go there. Now, all the things that you see, the cameras that hop around on gadgets. That is all my design.

INT: Now, those were the simulators and whatnot?

OH: Simulators. I started working there for them before they started Space Camp. Space Camp was not started until I think '82 and I started before that. And they had rides for the public and they didn't have much money. So they bought used carnival equipment that had a spacey [22:00] aspect to it, and I had to fix them up and modify them. But then

when Space Camp came in they got the simulators, surplus simulators, from Houston that were out of date or broken. But that didn't do them much good because they were really not meant to run a thousand kids through per month. They were fine-tuned for each astronaut. So it was my task more or less to design simulators that looked like what NASA [22:48] used but ruggedize them for quick through-put and do similar things [23:00] so they could say These are astronaut simulators. I made the drawings and they contracted out for the manufacturing.

INT: Vince, you mentioned earlier I think you had a follow-up question you wanted to ask.

INT: I wanted to ask you, just briefly --

OH: Yes.

INT: -- if you have any recollections or thoughts in general about -- I assume you knew Toftoy [23:32]?

OH: Yes.

INT: Did you ever meet him?

OH: I think so.

INT: Okay. And any thoughts about him?

OH: Very nice man. Very nice man. Very congenial. I still see his face and his smile. That's my image of him.

INT: How about Medaris [23:53]?

OH: Yes, I shook hands with him [24:00] when he gave me the meritorious service award but I was not in meetings with him.

INT: Okay. Any other thoughts about Hamill [24:11]?

OH: Very nice man. I -- may I tell you an interesting story? When the women came -- the

wives came -- they had to modify, make little cities for all temporary wartime wards. And they were 100 feet long, 24 -- mostly wards had just bunk beds in them and then a little nurses' quarters. They modified those. Each ward became four little apartments with kitchens so a little family could live in them. But they had two wards [25:00] which were for psychiatric. And they were made with concrete walls. Concrete plaster. They had the plumbing in there -- you couldn't turn it on. You had to push buttons. They were not available for modification. And then Oscar said, "Major Hamill [25:25], I noticed there are two wards that are not modified. Could I perhaps have one of those wards?" And I had the whole thing. We had 20 bedrooms.

[laughter]

I had that big end room which was about half as big as this house where I did all this automotive repair.

[laughter]

One time the fire marshal came in because it was known I did welding in there [26:00].

INT: Did Hamill [26:02] come to Huntsville or was he only at Bliss [26:04]?

OH: I never saw him in Huntsville.

INT: Okay. Two more questions. Again, we're just desperate to have some sort of recollection of Camp Strong [26:17]. Others have told us that when they went to Strong, they remembered that Thanksgiving dinner they couldn't have a dinner because there was a storm and it was leaking and so they had to eat K rations instead of having a Thanksgiving dinner. Does that bring back any recall?

OH: I'm pretty sure I like K rations --

[laughter]

-- but no, that doesn't ring a bell for some reason.

INT: Sure. Final comment -- and this is just a personal interest question -- and that has to do with [27:00] the transition of the German engineer scientists from the United States Army to NASA [27:10]. Do you have any thoughts about that transition? Was that a good transition?

OH: Seamless.

INT: Seamless.

OH: Seamless. Somebody asked me that before and they said, "Do you remember anything that was --" and I said, "Yeah. The locks came off the safes because NASA [27:36] was open. Nothing classified. Nothing classified. Until somebody -- confidential, confidential. But I tell you, - you might say an irony or strange thing. When we [28:00] - - when they seriously started missile work here -- by that time I was given a small design group. I was a group leader and I had two engineers and two draftsmen but we needed more people for what they wanted. So the Army was cagey. They went into the troops around the country just like I was picked in Germany and they gave me soldiers. I had four or five soldier engineers in one draftsman who were in uniform and came to me. I was their boss and formally I was still an enemy alien.

[laughter]

Because I couldn't get citizenship because Russians [29:00] had [unintelligible] and I became a citizen in 1955.

INT: And do you remember what that event -- were you alone or were you with a group?

OH: No. It was a whole group in Birmingham [29:16] for citizenship. And, you know, by that time, immigration -- you cannot be in the country already and apply for citizenship.

You have to physically cross a border. So what was done just before we arrived -- came to Huntsville -- they put us on this street car to Juarez [29:42] in Mexico. We went to the American Consulate [29:46]. This was on a ranch. It was a sign here, sign here, sign here. We went back -- immigration stamps -- so we were now legally in the United States [30:00]. But that is not citizenship. That is sort of green card stuff. And it takes five years of good behavior to apply and then five years of good behavior before you become a citizen.

INT: So you're still waiting for citizenship?

OH: No, no, no.

[laughter]

That happened in '55.

INT: As we run out of tape I'll just hand over to you some of the documents we're going to leave with you and see if you recognize that fine-looking young fellow.

OH: Well, that's Oscar! Look, there's my finger prints. No kidding. That's amazing.

INT: This is some of the packet from the National Archives with your basic information and there's --

OH: My wife's name [31:00].

INT: There's descriptions of what you did and you'll also see some of the back and forth trying to figure out if you and your wife were Nazi [31:12] party members and what not. Some of that's included in here as well.

OH: Right. She was -- she had some trouble.

INT: Yeah, and that's described in here in fact, a little bit of that.

OH: And I had to concoct and she was indeed still --

[end of transcript]

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