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Alfred Larsen Oral History Interview: Polar Bear Oral History Project

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POLAR BEAR ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Mr. Alfred M. Larsen

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Hope College Archives Council
Holland, Michigan
1977



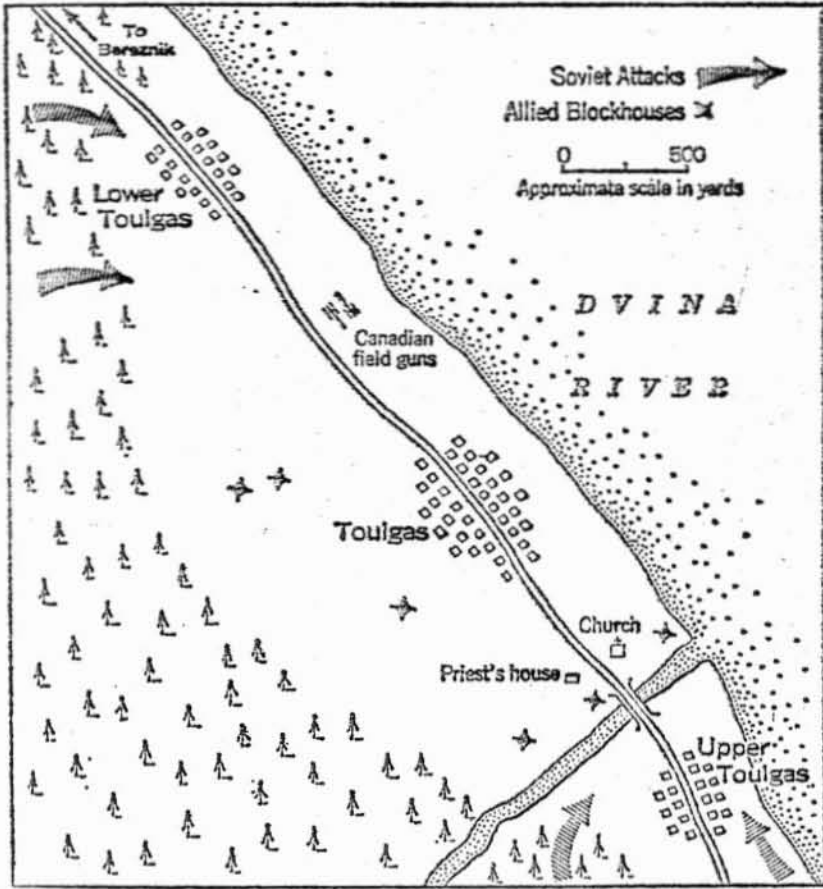
Mr. Alfred M. Larsen

The Hope College Polar Bear Oral History Project was conducted from summer 1977 through fall 1979. Three undergraduate History majors, Ms. Nancy Johnson, Ms. Deborah Lenning, and Mr. Glen Johnson, researched the American Intervention in the Russian civil war, located the survivors, and did the interviews. They also typed the rough drafts and attended to the many administrative details related to getting the manuscripts into final form. The latter task was cheerfully completed by departmental secretaries Myra Jordan and Carole Boeve and their assistants. The students worked under the general supervision of G.L. Penrose of the Department of History. Ultimately, the project depended upon the diligence of the students and upon the willing responses of the veterans.

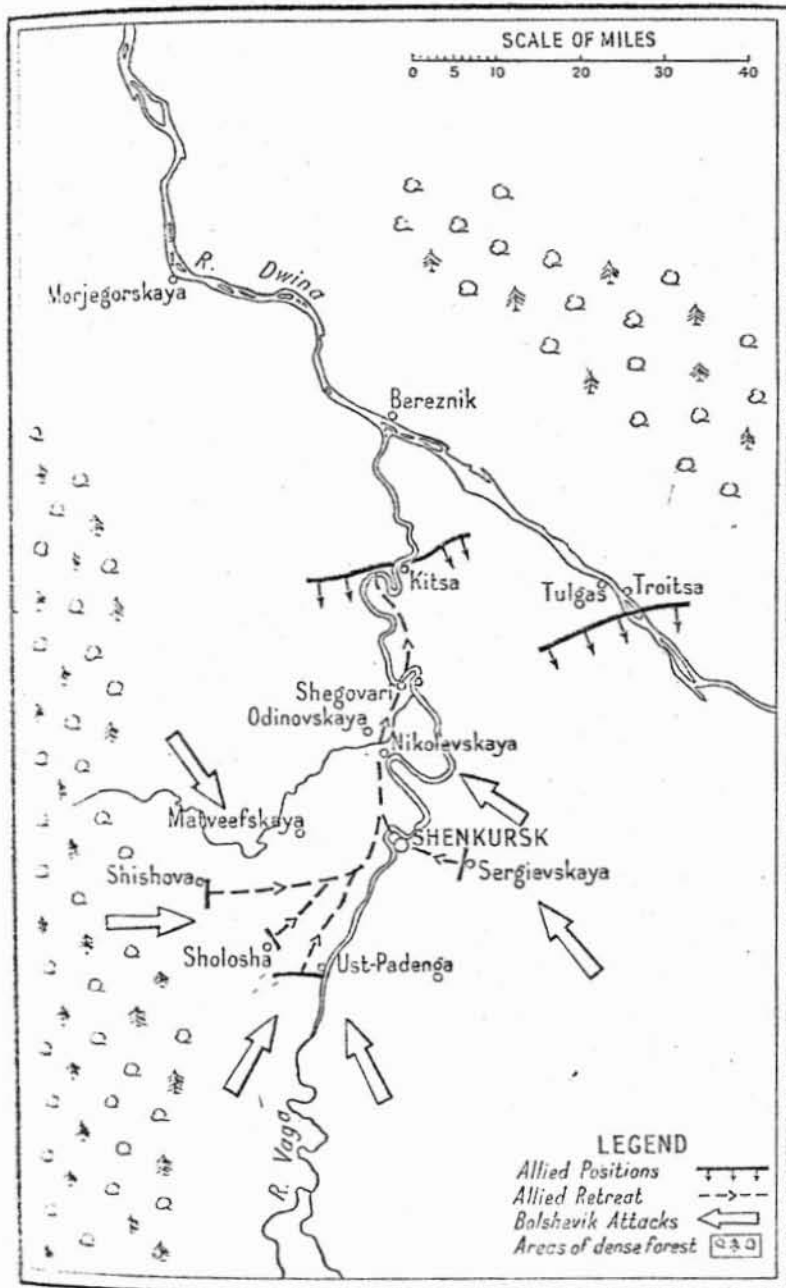
Department of History
Hope College
Holland, Michigan
1979

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TOULGAS, NOVEMBER 11-14, 1918



FIGHTING AT SHENKURSK
19TH JANUARY 1919

Preface

Interviewee: Mr. Alfred M. Larsen

Interview I: June 13, 1977

Mr. Larsen's home in Farmington Hills, Michigan

Interviewers: Ms. Nancy L. Johnson

Ms. Deborah A. Lenning

Associate Directors - Polar Bear Oral History Project

Hope College, Summer 1977

ALFRED M. LARSEN

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH AND SUMMARY OF CONTENTS

Mr. Alfred M. Larsen was born in Manistee, Michigan on February 9, 1895. His father, Anton C., was born in Aalborg, Denmark; his mother, Marie Jensen, in Elling, Denmark. Mr. Larsen attended the Manistee Public School until 1915, after which he became a machinist. Before the war he was employed by American Car and Foundry.

Mr. Larsen tried to enlist in the navy, but was conscripted into the army in September of 1917. As he had trained for three years in the Michigan National Guard, his captain made him a sergeant. He served in the Third Platoon of Company "D" of the 339th Infantry Regiment. He was sent to Camp Custer for training and remained there until July, 1918. At that time he sailed to England with his company for final preparation and training. They spent nearly four weeks at Camp Cowshot before sailing from Newcastle-on-the-Tyne. He made the voyage to North Russia on the H.M.T. Nagoya.

Upon arrival in Archangel on September fifth, his company was sent up the Dvina River with the First Battalion. They chased the retreating Bolsheviks south for many miles during their first few weeks there. When the advance up the Dvina halted, Mr. Larsen was part of the unit which explored and established the Vaga River front. He operated for five weeks in a detachment under the command of a Russian captain: "the lost platoon of Company 'D'." They returned to the Dvina in time to fight in the fierce battle at Tulgas from November 11 to 14, 1918. His was one of the companies which held Tulgas in the ensuing weeks. When they were relieved by the White Russians, the village fell to the Bolsheviks and Sgt. Larsen was one of the men sent to re-take it.

In late January the Vaga Column was in trouble. Company "A" retreated north from Ustopodenga, suffering terrific losses, and then joined the other Allies in Chenkursk. The town was evacuated and a general retreat northward began, which lasted all through the spring of 1919. Company "D" met up with the retreating troops at Shegovari and from there did rear guard all the way back to Vistavka. They retreated some fifty miles, under heavy attack for about two months. Mr. Larsen was garrisoned in the vicinity of Kitska during this slow retreat. In early June he was sent north of Archangel to prepare for departure. A few weeks later, all the American troops left North Russia for the United States. Mr. Larsen's company stopped at Brest, France to change transports and then proceeded to Camp Devons, Boston before returning to Michigan.

Mr. Larsen received his discharge from the U.S. Army on July 19, 1919. Following that, he became the first employee, a superintendent, of the Star Tool & Die Works in Detroit, Michigan. He remained there until his retirement in 1962. He married Ellen Bridget McIlhargey on October 4, 1920. They had three children: Marie Ellen, born [date removed], 1918; Margaret Ann, born [date removed], 1931; and Alfred C., born [date removed], 1931. Both daughters are secretaries and "very fine mothers." His son is a tool and die worker.

Mr. Larsen now resides in Farmington Hills, north of Detroit, Michigan. His many hobbies include boating and bowling. He has a fine family and one of his favorite hobbies is "enjoying my sixteen grandchildren." He is also interested in charity work. For many years he has been active in the Veterans of Foreign Wars and the Polar Bear Association. He has served as the President of the Polar Bear Association for the past seven years, and also belongs to the Polar Bear Post 436 V.F.W. of Detroit, Michigan.

In his interview, Mr. Larsen gives an insightful account of his unit's activities on the river fronts. He furnishes many details about events such as the battle of Tulgas and the retreat from Chenkursk. He portrays conditions on the front as vividly as he describes the lifestyle of the North Russian peasantry. Of particular interest is his discussion of inter-allied relations and the Americans' peculiar relationship with their enemy. Mr. Larsen is very frank and covers most aspects of the campaign thoroughly.

JOHNSON: First of all, were you drafted or did you enlist for World War I?

LARSEN: I was conscripted. (laughter)

JOHNSON: How did you feel about that?

LARSEN: How did I feel about that? Well, I'll tell you, before I was conscripted I--when I knew we were going to have the war--when we signed up with the draft boards, you know, then I went to enlist in the navy and they wouldn't have us. They had enough in the navy. So then I said, "I'll wait for the draft, and I would like to go along with the first contingent." Then they forgot that so I went with the second one.

JOHNSON: What was your training experience at Camp Custer like?

LARSEN: Well, my experience was not too bad because I had trained three years in the National Guard--the Michigan National Guard. And when the captain found that out I immediately became sergeant, so I was a little bit ahead of so many of the others.

JOHNSON: Were you happy then, about being sent overseas?

LARSEN: Well, I don't think anybody could--you could say that--well, I guess some guys were, but I wouldn't say I was happy. I was willing. Well, you might have a moment of ill-at-ease, or something, too, going away. I had six sisters, and two brothers, a mother and father behind me. I was the only one out of the whole gang in the service.

JOHNSON: What did you think your orders would be after you finished training

at Camp Custer?

LARSEN: Well, we got the orders to leave. All we knew, we were going to board ships and go to England. And we landed at Liverpool. And then we were moved over to Camp Cowshot. That was over near London, about twenty-five miles from London. Camp Cowshot was at a town called Brookwood. And we were there for, oh, I think nearly four weeks. And then one evening they sent us up to Newcastle-on-the-Tyne by rail. And the next night we left there at midnight. It happened to be a nice, dark night. So we sailed out on the North Sea. I was on a boat called the Nagoya. And we sailed down the river and the first thing we knew when it got daylight--we got farther going north, we could tell that. Then they put the infantrymen out on the boat, on guard. We were on iceberg guard duty--looking for icebergs, because we were seeing them going up along the Norwegian coast. And when we got up to the Arctic Ocean, too. So we were two weeks doing that, to get from Newcastle to Archangel.

JOHNSON: When did you find out that you were going to Archangel?

LARSEN: Honest to goodness, we didn't even know it on the boat. But it didn't take much sense to know we were going someplace like that, when you find icebergs and you're going up in the Arctic Circle. They don't tell the enlisted men what they're doing. The officers have that, and they have to come and pass on the word from one to the other and so forth.

JOHNSON: So, when you were in England you still thought you would be going to France?

LARSEN: No, no, because they issued us some heavy underwear. That kind of threw us off, too; you know in August we didn't need any heavy underwear in

France. But by September you needed it all right, in Archangel or Russia. I never spent any time in Archangel.

JOHNSON: What did you know of Russia when you landed there? Did you know anything about it, or about Bolshevism?

LARSEN: Oh, we knew that there was some Bolshevism going on, because we came there just about the time of their revolution. And we knew that these guys were there, trying to agitate the revolution. And I think we did more in the revolution than we did in anything else.

JOHNSON: How did you feel about Bolshevism?

LARSEN: I still don't like it. (laughs)

JOHNSON: On the trip on the Nagoya, what kind of medical care was there for the men stricken with the Spanish flu?

LARSEN: On the ship I was on, we just had some men who were in the medical corps. They would dish out some pills, this, or that, or the other thing. On the boat I was on, actually no one died. But, there was also some Italian boats following along with us and we could see those guys going overboard every once in a while. They died, you know, they couldn't keep them; they had to bury them at sea. They were fellows that they took from southern Italy. Foolish thing to do, too. It maybe would have been a little better if they'd taken some from the northern part, instead of the sunny part.

JOHNSON: Would you say, then, that the medical care was adequate on the boat?

LARSEN: No, no, I wouldn't say it was adequate. I don't know as it was ever

adequate. To the best of my knowledge, we only had two doctors out on the field with us.

JOHNSON: Was there enough medicine?

LARSEN: The best medicine we had was the rum we stole from the British.
(laughter)

LENNING: What were your first instructions after arrival?

LARSEN: After we unloaded in Russia? We got off the boat at a place called Bakaritsa. And that's right across the bay from Archangel. Our boat didn't stop at Archangel at all. The next day we were loaded on to some scows, and then we started going up the Dvina River. Now this is my unit that did this-- the First Battalion. The Third Battalion, they, I think, went down the railroad. So that'd be a different story. I never did get to the railroad.

LENNING: How much did you know about the purpose of your mission?

LARSEN: Well, while we were still on the boat the rumor was we were going to Russia to preserve the rations that were there. But then there were no rations there when we got there. The people were very hungry. As a matter of fact, they ate the garbage that we threw out of the boat. Of course, we brought a lot of rations along with us, and the boats kept coming in--they had to get it in, because the place'd freeze up solid before winter came.

LENNING: When were you first informed that you would be fighting the Bolsheviks?

LARSEN: I don't know as we were ever informed that we were fighting the Bolsheviks. There was another--as far as we were concerned, I guess maybe

it was true--but to us it was our rumor, that we were going there to guard the rations and prevent the Germans from establishing a submarine base in the White Sea. Now, could they have done that and the war continued, that would have been a good advantage point for them in the North Atlantic. But that never happened. The revolution came in before that happened; the war ended before they could ever have done much about it anyway.

LENNING: Who commanded your outfit?

LARSEN: Colonel Craig was our commander while we were in Camp Custer and did not go to Russia. Colonel Stewart was our commanding officer while we were in Russia. The British had generals to out-rank Colonel Stewart.

LENNING: What do you recollect about him?

LARSEN: Not very much. I didn't see him very often. We'd see a major more than we'd see a colonel. And Corbley was the major of our battalion.

LENNING: Did you ever see General Poole?

LARSEN: No, not Poole--Ironside.

LENNING: What do you remember about Ironside?

LARSEN: Well, he came up to visit us. We were holding a base up the river a ways there. He came up and he was going to have an inspection, I guess. As soon as he got there, the Bolsheviks started cannon fire, you know, artillery fire. So he just hustled right back again. (laughter) He wasn't there half a day.

LENNING: What about Colonel Stewart? Did you ever see him?

LARSEN: Well, not very often. We'd see our major every once in a while. But the majors are the ones that conduct the war from the headquarters, you know. They get orders from headquarters, where we were supposed to go and things like that.

LENNING: What do you remember about Major Corbley?

LARSEN: Very good soldier. Probably the best major we had up there.

LENNING: What was the rank of the man generally in charge of a detachment?

LARSEN: A lieutenant would be in charge. Sometimes it might be a first lieutenant, or it might be a second lieutenant. In my case it was a second lieutenant. Smith's platoon was also a second lieutenant. The first and fourth platoons, they had first lieutenants.

LENNING: Were you ever in charge of a patrol?

LARSEN: Oh, yes. You have details, and sometimes a corporal can take a detail, and sometimes a sergeant does. But we got down to where we only had two sergeants, so--there should be four, but through sickness, and things, they . . . They didn't have any replacements there--hard job to get them. We did get some replacements from France, from another unit that trained at Camp Custer. Went overseas the same time we did, but they went to France, and we went to Russia.

JOHNSON: When did they join you?

LARSEN: Just before the thing froze up tight. They were shipped from France to be replacements. Of course, you know, we had a lot of guys who were sick, and a lot of them died just from sickness, and never heard a bullet even.

LENNING: When did you first encounter fighting with the Bolsheviks?

LARSEN: Well, as I was saying, we loaded on this scow, in a tug that burned slabs, to make steam with, wood-burning. And then they hauled us, I think, about seventy-five miles, which took a couple of days. And then we got off and we started trampling along the river, on roads that lead along the river, looking for the Bolsheviks. In a couple more days we met up with them. But at that particular time, like I've always said, fifty Americans could chase five hundred of those, at that particular time. But before it was over, it was reversed.

LENNING: They didn't give you the impression of being well-trained?

LARSEN: No, not at the beginning. We had the rag-tag of the White Army and the Red Army. The White was supposed to be on our side, and we were supposed to be helping them. And the Reds were the Communists, or the Bolsheviks-- Bolos, we knew them as.

LENNING: Were their weapons and numbers far superior to yours?

LARSEN: We used the same rifles, same ammunition. We trained in Camp Custer with an Enfield and when we got there we used the same Russian rifle. That was because we figured we would capture their ammunition, and we would have the ammunition there. It was a good gun; it was a little longer than the one we trained with over at Custer, and it had a three-cornered bayonet, where we used to have a flat bayonet.

LENNING: What were your instructions? To fight the Bolsheviks?

LARSEN: Sure.

LENNING: Was this the first time that you knew you were going to fight the Bolsheviks?

LARSEN: You have to remember that the Russians made a separate peace with Germany. And so as things progressed they didn't need anybody on the Eastern Front anymore, because there was no fighting going on there. So those people who had been on the Eastern Front, they made it tough for us later on. They were trained soldiers, but at first we just had these rag-tag, I call them.

LENNING: Were you told why you were supposed to fight the Bolsheviks?

LARSEN: No. They don't tell you those things. You're sent out there, and the enemy is there, so you do the best you can with it.

LENNING: Where did you go first?

LARSEN: We went on up the Dvina River, where the biggest fight we had was at Tulgas. Upper and Lower Tulgas, and we held that for about a week. And then there were two or three platoons sent out ahead to --just to reconnoiter and see if we could see anything out there. And I took one patrol out myself. And we were told to follow a river that was a tributary of the Dvina River. And so we followed the river for eight miles to see if there were any enemies in the area; then we returned with our report, which was negative. We were eight hours going out; took us about an hour and a half to come back 'cause we cut right straight back.

LENNING: Was that the Vaga River?

LARSEN: No, it was some other small tributary of the Dvina. The Vaga River was farther north than we were then. We were going south all the time.

LENNING: Before you fought at Tulgas, were you at the battle at Seltso?

LARSEN: Seltso was the next village. We attacked and moved a little farther south. Seltso and Tulgas were all along the river. Each one of those towns, as we came along, we had to chase them out. And then sometimes they would skip maybe two or three towns and we'd just have to keep following on to find out where they are again.

LENNING: When did your advance stop?

LARSEN: Well, we were perhaps twenty-five or thirty miles beyond Seltso. And then they put us on a scow, and we came back and went up the Vaga River for a ways. And I think in that area is where the Kodish front was. But we didn't get to Kodish. We stopped before that. We were at towns called Kitska, Vistavka, along that river. We went further south; we were--this outfit I was with--under the command of a Russian captain. One platoon, the third platoon, went--we had forty men left in it, and he had about forty, and we were like freelancers. We went wherever this guy wanted to go. And he really knew his stuff, and he had men with him who knew how to find their way around in the woods. Tremendous fellow, Captain Michevskii. He was a Russian; he had been an officer in the tsar's army. So he was a White Russian.

LENNING: Was this the platoon which disappeared for five weeks? Under Lieutenant Wallace?

LARSEN: Wallace was our lieutenant and Captain Michevskii was the commander of it. That's all the officers we had, except for non-coms--that's a non-commissioned officer.

LENNING: When was it that you were gone for five weeks and nobody knew where you were?

LARSEN: That would have been the month of November. On our first skirmish there, we were in a village called Shred Makringa. And we had quite a fight there. Happened on a Sunday. And when that was over, we went a little further south, to a place called Gora. Then we went from there--we didn't find any enemy in Gora--but we went about fifteen miles further; it was another little village, which I don't recall the name. We walked through the woods all night, and we were attacking from the rear. Then we captured all the supplies they had. We didn't capture any people, but we captured all their supplies. I think there was fifteen wagons of stuff they had--supplies of one kind or another. And by this time we were as lousy as could be, and finally got back to Seletskoe, I believe was the next place--was our next stop. Then we stayed there about a week. Had it real soft for a week. "F" Company was there, and we just billeted right in with them, and went into machine gun school. So that was one time that we had a week's rest, and that's about the only time I can think of where we had more than a day at a time.

LENNING: When did you find out that the armistice had been signed?

LARSEN: I think it was near Christmas, or New Year's, or something like that. We certainly didn't know it on that day.

LENNING: Do you remember what you were doing on armistice day?

LARSEN: No. It had no significance to us to know where we went; it was just another day.

LENNING: What impact did the news of the armistice have on the troops?

LARSEN: Well, we wondered why we had to keep fighting, why we had to keep

on staying here. You know, our hardest fighting was after--in 1919. And the armistice was, what, November 11, 1918. And after the armistice we had harder going than we had in the beginning, when we first started out there. We lost more--casualties, and harder fighting.

LENNING: Would you say that the morale was lower after the men found out that the war in the west was over?

LARSEN: Well, there was a different kind of morale. Then you began--you knew you were fighting for self-preservation. I will say, as far as fighting them, that didn't mean anything to us. We wanted to stay alive and get the hell out of there. (laughs; pauses) And many of us didn't.

LENNING: How far did the wounded have to be transported?

LARSEN: The wounded--they had a hospital in Archangel. So the wounded were evacuated to Archangel by sled. There was no other way, no other mode of travel except with one of these little horses and a sled. The Russians had quite a few of those, and sometimes they even hauled some of our equipment for us. And so it'd be a ride on a sled, if he was, you know, wounded badly enough to have to go to the hospital. It was a ride from there to Archangel, depending where you were. At one time I was three hundred miles from Archangel.

JOHNSON: And there was nothing in between?

LARSEN: Just a line of communication which was very thin. When they attacked us, nearly always they attacked from the rear. I remember one morning up there at Tulgas--this was the second attack on us--the Canadian artillery was there with us. And, they had their guns facing where the enemy

should be. But they had circled around and came in the back. So these Canadians, they pulled their guns out of the pit and reversed them, and gave muzzle bursts. And they killed an awful lot of Russians that day. That was at Tulgas. Tulgas was sort of a, I think, like a focal point. There was some stories about we were going south and there was another army should start at Vladivostok and they would come north and we would meet somewhere along the line. And then we could combine our forces. But nothing like that ever happened. As far as I know, it never even came close.

JOHNSON: You were saying before that there were only a couple of doctors for each company?

LARSEN: I don't think there were a couple of doctors for each company. There was a medical corps there, which was in the charge of one doctor, and they would have the hospital corps. These men were like infantrymen only they worked in the hospital part of it. And then there was a ambulance company, the 337th Ambulance and the 337th Field Hospital Corps.

JOHNSON: So what kind of medical care was there right at the front?

LARSEN: Well, I know the first two guys that was wounded--I can't remember this doctor's name, but he was a tall, slender fellow. He did, you know, the best he could. These guys are laying in a barn on some straw or swamp hay. He did what he could.

JOHNSON: Did you ever witness any cases of neglect by a medical or supply officer?

LARSEN: No. I think they did the best they could with what they had.

JOHNSON: What did they have? Was it adequate?

LARSEN: I can't tell you that. I wasn't in it. I never had to call for a medical corps. (laughter) Yes, we just buried a fellow. He died on the twelfth of January--Louis Marietta. He was somehow attached with the medical corps. And then we have another guy by the name of John Percy Cloch, who was in the medical corps and he did a lot of work at Kodish. Now what I know about this is what I have from hearsay. I was not there.

JOHNSON: Was the fighting often continuously severe?

LARSEN: No, no. It was more often a day or two. Not--you know, it wouldn't go on for a week or so at a time. I guess no one could stand it, to go that long. But if--you were renewed every short while.

JOHNSON: Were there any problems with relief troops?

LARSEN: Once in a while they would send another company up to relieve you, and then you'd go back a little ways. And then the first thing you know, you've just got settled down and away you'd go again. (laughter) You didn't have that many people. There were only fifty-five hundred of us in the beginning, and a good many of those was sick. When I got off the boat at Archangel, or across the bay from there--we had sixty-two men when we left England--there was only forty were able to go on with us out on the fighting line. They stayed at a makeshift hospital that they built in Bakaritsa. Farther up the river we had another--up the Dvina River was Bereznik. They had supplies there. So if you had to come back and get supplies, like food, you'd come back that far.

LENNING: Was that a British headquarters?

LARSEN: They had a headquarters there. I took a detail back to get some supplies for my platoon. I think I had about six fellows and two sleighs with me. And

I carried a few extra sergeant chevrons in my pocket. When we got to Bereznik, they had what they call a Sergeants' Club there. The British, they were a little different than they were in the American army. A sergeant was a pretty big shot in the British Army--more so than a sergeant in the American army. But they would invite us in. So, I, being the only sergeant there, we just pinned a few chevrons on the other guys, and we all went in. (laughter) Then we had lots to drink, sing, and the little special eats that they had there. I hope they don't come and arrest me now. (laughter)

JOHNSON: How did the lack of relief troops affect the men's morale?

LARSEN: Well, I think in a very few instances some of them complained. They had frozen feet or something like that; that would get them a trip back to Archangel. But on the whole they were mighty good guys. They were no slackers; there was no people that you have to have amnesty for today. There was nothing like that. They stayed, and they did their job to the best of their ability.

JOHNSON: Was your clothing adequate?

LARSEN: Yes, but you wore it for a long, long, time! (laughter)

JOHNSON: How common was frostbite?

LARSEN: Quite common. It was cold. However, you had a good hat on; you had a good coat on; you had heavy underwear. But your face--your nose--could freeze up and you wouldn't even know it. And your fingers--it's kind of hard to handle a gun, you know, if you've got big mittens on. So your hands and face could freeze up. So we would--Russian women, they were always glad to help you. Quite often they'd pour the oil out of their lamp into a bowl and

they'd bathe your hands or put some on your face and thaw you out, let you hang around the stove for a while, 'cause they were there, you know, just like we were. When we left, they stayed, in most cases.

JOHNSON: What was the initial reaction of the peasants to the troops?

LARSEN: Well, there was a difficulty knowing--really knowing--who was your friend and who wasn't. As a rule, the White Russians, so-called, were quite friendly. We could barter with them; we could trade maybe bully beef for some potatoes. If you happened to find a bottle of liquor someplace, you could almost buy his family for that.

JOHNSON: Did the peasants have any definite political convictions as to whether they wanted the Bolsheviks or the White Russians to win?

LARSEN: I don't think they wanted either one. They were satisfied to be left alone, let them eke out their life the way they were. They didn't have anything, so they had nothing to lose.

JOHNSON: Did the peasants seem to feel that the Allies were interfering?

LARSEN: No, I think they welcomed us like you would a stranger coming into your house, in most cases.

JOHNSON: Did their reaction change during the time you were there?

LARSEN: Oh, yes, there was quite a bit of change there. We had several fellows that--they were't shot, they were murdered. And that was by the natives. Whatever town you were in, you couldn't be sure whether he was a Bolo or he was a White Russian--a Red or a White. But when we would get billeted for the night, if we happened to be in a town, we would put guards. You know there

was only one road--one path--going through the town. We put guards at either end, and one night they murdered both ends--the guard on the road.

JOHNSON: Were they American guards?

LARSEN: Oh, yes.

JOHNSON: Did you ever stay in a Russian family's home?

LARSEN: Yes.

JOHNSON: How did they react to your presence?

LARSEN: Well, if you got good and friendly with the madam of the house--the mother of the family--if she liked you you had a private place to sleep on the top of the stove. (laughs)

LENNING: Was it the madam and not the mister? (laughs)

LARSEN: Well, she took care of the house pretty good. As a matter of fact, the women did most everything. The man had it pretty soft, I would say. I noticed in the spring when they went out to get the planting going--the plowing and so forth--the man walked along the side of the horse. The woman, she steered the plow. And if it got too tough, she'd go up and pull with the horse. Then the old man would steer the plow. Otherwise, he just walked up by his head. You've seen people walk alongside of an elephant? You know they don't do nothing; they just walk there. Well, that's what there men did with those droschkis, outfits they had.

JOHNSON: You said before that the peasants' attitude toward the soldiers changed. Why do you think they became hostile enough to kill American soldiers?

LARSEN: See, I don't know why they did that. We would assume that they were the Red people, the Communists. Because they were there all the time.

JOHNSON: What about the average peasant who didn't care who won?

LARSEN: They were quite nice. They would usually have four or five in a family. The priests there, they had maybe ten or twelve because they were the Orthodox Greek, I think, where they marry and have a family.

LENNING: Were you ever present when the American soldiers had to burn villages?

LARSEN: Yes. I helped do it. Gordon Smith--he was, I'd say, the best patrol sergeant . . . They would use these blockhouses in the woods, and from that, they'd come out and spy on us, see what we were doing. So it behooved us to get rid of that blockhouse. And Gordon Smith I'll bet got that job fifty times, well no--more than that--say nine times out of ten. If there was a blockhouse that needed burning, Gordon got that job. There'd be himself, a corporal, and four or five privates. And they would carry cans of kerosene, and they would throw this stuff on it, set a match on it, then they'd run like hell.

LENNING: What about the peasants' homes? Were they ever burned when you had to burn the blockhouses?

LARSEN: Well, when they burned the villages? Yes.

LENNING: What was that like?

LARSEN: Well, you see sometimes you had to get rid of them because they made a focal point for the enemy. He could come and use that village for his headquarters. So to keep him from using it, we would have to burn it up.

LENNING: What would happen to the peasants?

LARSEN: Well, they'd just have to find new places to go.

LENNING: Do you think that might have affected their attitude towards you, or do you think that they understood?

LARSEN: I think they understood. I know that at the first fight we had there was a hill, I guess, and a wide plateau, with some strawstacks.

LENNING: Was that at Tulgas?

LARSEN: Yes, going towards Tulgas. And we made our first attack on Tulgas, and we got down to this plateau. And it was very nice, level, country. And the natives were coming out of the town over here--Tulgas--with their carts, and their horses, and dragging everything they could with them. And they kept telling us, "Bolshevik! Bolshevik! Bolshevik!" We kept right on going anyhow. And when we got up there a way, the Bolsheviks were so anxious to annihilate us that they started shooting too soon. Had they waited a little longer, we would have been in range of their guns, rifle fire and one-pounder, and they could have killed us all because they were all dug in on the side of the hill. This happened about four o'clock in the afternoon.

So we dug holes and laid out there in that field that night until the next afternoon, when our artillery managed to get up one Russian gun. So they stayed back on this hill over here and fired over there and knocked them out. We could see them getting out of their nests that they had dug in the side of the hill over there and taking off. So then immediately we walked in, and we took that town. We didn't burn it, we just took it. It belonged to us then. And we stayed there overnight that night, then the next day we went out a little further--to a couple other smaller towns out there. And that was when I went out on a patrol to see if we could see anything of them--how far they'd gone.

So we knew they were gone that far after following this river. We knew there was no one there. I don't know how far they went because right after that we went back again. I guess somebody figured we were far enough away now from the base, which was, I think, somewhere between, oh, maybe two hundred and fifty miles.

LENNING: What were the sanitary conditions at the front like?

LARSEN: There weren't any. (laughter)

LENNING: What about the housing?

LARSEN: If you were lucky, you might find a place where they had cut the--you know, the houses over there were in two parts. The people lived in one; the animals lived in the other one. And usually there was a ramp going up to the upper part of the place where the animals were, so whatever hay they had they could shove it through--down to the animals. And if somebody was a little ambitious or something they would make a little square hole in there and a two-by-four around there--that was your toilet.

LENNING: Did you serve with any other Allied troops?

LARSEN: We were not with them. There were others there for the same purpose that we were there. But nobody had as many as we had. There was Polish, and like I said about the Italians--came up with us, and they had one or two boatloads. I never saw them after we got there. I don't know where they sent them.

LENNING: You mentioned that you had Canadians with you.

LARSEN: Oh yes, the Canadian Artillery. And then from England we had some Royal Scots. They worked right with us. They intermingled their line along with us. One of the reasons for that, I think, was because they weren't

dependable. They were guys that had been in France and shot up and were sent back to England to recuperate. They were able to do something, so they thought they were going to give them a cushy job and send them up to Archangel. They were worse off than they were in France.

LENNING: What about the White Russian troops?

LARSEN: They were not highly trained. Even when we captured the Bolshevik troops, the British tried to make soldiers out of them by entering them in the White Army. That made it tougher for us because we took Tulgas and then we turned it over to the Russian army, and pretty soon it was lost, and we had to go and do it all over again.

LENNING: So they weren't dependable either?

LARSEN: They weren't, no.

LENNING: How did it make the troops feel? The American troops who couldn't depend on their allies?

LARSEN: Well, we got along pretty good with the Scots, but when we got mixed up with the British--the real British troops--then there was no good feeling there. I mentioned this over at WCAR the other night, and the guy that was putting on the radio, he was an Englishman. (laughter)

JOHNSON: Why didn't you get along with the British?

LARSEN: Oh, I don't know. They wanted us to think they were a superior people. Of course, they had all the officers. Like I said, so many times if we had a captain down the line and they only had a lieutenant, pretty soon, well somebody was made a major--which is a step above a captain--so he could be in command.

LENNING: A British or an American would be made a major?

LARSEN: A British.

JOHNSON: Did you ever feel as though you were fighting more for the British than you were for America?

LARSEN: No, no. I don't think the British had near as many troops over there as we had American troops. You know, if you read one of those books, it tells you how they worked on President Wilson to get his permission to send us there. And they lied to him. They made him believe that it was just a garrison job over there, and there wouldn't be no fighting. We was just doing guard duty. That's where we got the notion, I guess, that we were going there to guard rations. And there were no rations to guard.

LENNING: How did you feel about fighting when your President had ordered you not to fight and the British made you fight?

LARSEN: Well, now nobody made us fight. We did fight. This was our orders and so we did it, wherever the orders came from.

LENNING: Did you know where the orders came from?

LARSEN: Except, well, they always come from the higher officers. And they might even come all the way from England, for all we know.

LENNING: What kind of Bolshevik propaganda did you encounter?

LARSEN: They just put some leaflets out in the woods, and you know, there were a few airplanes in those days--not very many. The natives, they were more afraid--the one doctor had somehow shanghaied an old Ford touring car up there which he drove--and they would run, like chickens, you know, when they saw that horseless

carriage coming down the road.

LENNING: What kind of propaganda did the Bolsheviks try and feed you?

LARSEN: Oh, that we should throw down our guns and join them. The same stuff they give you today.

LENNING: And nobody fell for that?

LARSEN: Oh no. Some of the prisoners that they took of American men--when I came back from Russia, the first man I met in the city of Detroit--they stopped the train when we were on our way to Camp Custer for discharge--and we stepped off and walked out to Fort Street, and the first guy I saw was a guy who was captured over there. He was home three months before we were, as a prisoner.

LENNING: Did you talk to him?

LARSEN: Sure, talked to him. I said, "How the hell did you get here?" So he gave a little story of how it was. He was captured, and they sent him over to where the railroad is. And there were several others, but it just happened to be that I knew this one man especially. He was in our outfit. Freeman Hogan was his name. Big fellow, not too bright--there was quite a few of those in the service. You didn't have to have an "A" to enter. (laughter)

LENNING: How did they treat him?

LARSEN: He said that when he was on this train along with these other guys, they would go maybe fifty miles, then they'd make these guys get off the train and march them over maybe a block from where the train is standing. And they would question them and make believe that they were going to shoot them right

there. They finally got them down to Petrograd. And from there they sent them over to Sweden. From Sweden they got back here to the United States--three months before we did! (laughter) That was his story. I had no experience like that myself.

LENNING: Did the British or your officers ever tell you what would happen if you were captured?

LARSEN: Not in so many words, I don't think. You always had a feeling you didn't want to be captured, at least I had a feeling that I didn't want to be one of their captives.

LENNING: Did you ever encounter any British propaganda?

LARSEN: Oh, yes. They were the biggest propagandists of all--even in France and all over England. But that's part of war, is propaganda. I guess you have to have it. Look at the propaganda you had in Vietnam.

LENNING: What sort of propaganda did the British use?

LARSEN: Oh, I don't know. I couldn't be very specific now.

LENNING: How were the Bolshevik prisoners treated?

LARSEN: Not very healthy, especially if they were captured by the Russian part of our army. No; they would shoot them rather than take them prisoner.

LENNING: How about the Bolsheviks who gave themselves up freely?

LARSEN: Those they would take, and retrain them, and put them back supposedly in the White Army. But I don't think that worked too good.

LENNING: Did you ever witness any atrocities by either the Allies or the Bolos?

LARSEN: Well, it depends on what you want to call an atrocity. I know a Red Russian officer that was captured; he was questioned by a White officer. And when they got out of him all they could, they just tossed him out of the building and shot him. Horizontal execution. I actually saw that once; now I don't know if that happened all the time.

JOHNSON: Did you ever receive any letters from home mentioning news reports of the expedition?

LARSEN: Oh this is something you're asking me now. I had the job of delivering the mail, and that was sometime just before Christmas. And I had a bag that I passed out to whoever we could find at this particular spot. And I myself got forty-six letters. That was the first time that we had any mail since we left Camp Custer. Didn't get any mail when I was in England until the latter part of December, 1918.

JOHNSON: Did the letters mention anything about the attempts to bring you home or the armistice?

LARSEN: I don't think there was anything done until long after--in 1919--long after the armistice was signed. I think our Senator Vandenberg and Senator Johnson, from what I know, probably did more than anyone else. My sister, who lived here in Detroit, she was out running around with petitions to get the boys out of Russia. I suppose many other women were doing the same thing.

JOHNSON: Did you know anything about that when you were in Russia?

LARSEN: NO.

JOHNSON: Was your mail ever censored?

LARSEN: It was my job one time.

JOHNSON: To censor the mail?

LARSEN: Well, several times I censored the mail that went out. And so once while I was doing that I wrote a letter to one of my teachers that I liked very well--'way back in Manistee where I went to school. She was an eighth-grade teacher, very fine gal. So I wrote her a letter which wasn't censored. Lo and behold, she put the damn thing in the newspaper--the Manistee News Advocate. And that got back to Russia. I got called on the carpet about it. I didn't say anything that was derogatory you know--giving anything away to the enemy--I just told her the conditions we were living under, which, when some of the other guys wrote, I wouldn't pass it. I'd cross it out. But I just thought I'd tell her. I never thought that she would put it in the paper. (laughter) But she did.

LENNING: What happened when you were called on the carpet?

LARSEN: Oh, I just got a little going over, a scolding.

JOHNSON: You weren't allowed to write about the conditions you were living under even though they were the truth?

LARSEN: Oh, I told them what we had to eat, and how we had to do it, and how we had to fix it. What would you do with a handful of rice and a piece of bacon when you have no place to cook it? You've got to wait until some Russian woman'll let you in her kitchen and borrow a kettle from her. I remember one time we pooled our rice--I borrowed a kettle and a stove from the--you know, they had these mammoth stoves, which once they built a fire in it, it's hot for twenty-four hours. So we pooled our rice, and I got a big crock from her, and I put it in the oven, and it began to cook. And it just went over like this. (makes overflowing gestures with hands.) I thought it was never going to stop! (laughter) That was some of the funny things that happened.

And another thing, they used to send us potatoes--like potato chips today. But they were dipped in parafin. So you could heat water, too. Not too bad. But, like, our lieutenant, he was going to cook one day. He said, "I'm going to give you guys some scalloped potatoes." So he gathered up these parafin chips, and he did the same thing I did--put them in the oven. And he was fixing them up--got some vegetables from someplace. And when he was done, they were just like glue. (laughter) The parafin all melted, and everything was sticky, you know.

LENNING: Was the food you received adequate for the physical labor that you had to do?

LARSEN: Well, it's what the army gave us. We used to get some beef once in a while, and it came in a can about this round, and there were some vegetables--we called it "M & V". I don't know where it came from--some packing house. When we first ate it for a little while it was pretty good, like some stew you might buy in a grocery store. It never tasted much like your mother made it for you. But it would get pretty tiresome, you know, after you had a few of them. Once in a while you'd get a can of corned beef and the hardtack. And we'd get some Russian bread occasionally. Every time I ate it, I'd have diarrhea for a week.

JOHNSON: Were you fairly well fed, then?

LARSEN: Oh, yes. Nobody starved, but it wasn't anything you'd want to eat.

JOHNSON: Did you ever know of any cases of malnutrition or food poisoning?

LARSEN: No, I don't think so. We all had ample of what there was; but like I say about the rice and the peas: you couldn't throw them in your mouth. Well,

I suppose you could if you were hungry enough, you could chew on them maybe. But I never got that bad off.

JOHNSON: Did you ever have any dealings with the Red Cross or the Y.M.C.A?

LARSEN: Well, the Red Cross, they caught up to us I think a day or two before we left Russia. The Y.M.C.A had some huts around various places. When you were going forward or coming back, you might run into one, and you could get a cup of cocoa or buy some cigarettes. They never gave us anything. At least I wasn't lucky enough to have any given to me. But they would give you a cup of cocoa sometimes, when you really needed it.

JOHNSON: Did you have any money to buy anything from them?

LARSEN: Well, we didn't get paid over there all the time we were there. And money was no good anyway. You could barter with something, you know, like once in a while you'd get a piece of candy somehow---somebody back here would send you a package and there might be a piece of candy. You could do a lot with that.

JOHNSON: When it came to buying something from the Y.M.C.A like cigarettes, how would you do that?

LARSEN: At that time they were fifty cents a package. And I think there was only ten cigarettes in each package--Ruby Queens. And that was an English--I guess they made them in England. And they came ten in a package. That was once in a while issued to us; we didn't have to buy them.

JOHNSON: Did you have the money to buy cigarettes?

LARSEN: Well, you finally got the money somehow from the Russians. I brought back quite a bit of coins and a few bills. What they called money is "ruble".

JOHNSON: Did you ever have any dealings with the Salvation Army?

LARSEN: We didn't see much of the Salvation Army. They were very good in France, though. And the Red Cross, they came and dished out some peaches and some Pet milk, or milk of that kind. The guys says to me, "What the hell am I going to do with this?" I said, "Didn't you ever hear of peaches and cream? Open that can, pour it in your mess kit, put the condensed milk in it, and you've got peaches and cream."

JOHNSON: How did you spend holidays like Thanksgiving and Christmas?

LARSEN: Well, I remember Christmas very distinctly. We were given some plum pudding--a pretty good portion of it. It was a special ration that one day. It was British, and I never cared very much for British food. We got enough of that over in Camp Cowshot. We ate mutton everyday.

LENNING: When did you leave Tulgas?

LARSEN: Oh, I can't tell you a specific date; I'd have to get out a diary for that.

LENNING: Do you have a diary?

LARSEN: I started one, and when we got so near being captured, I just left all of the junk there.

LENNING: When was that?

LARSEN: Oh, that was back in about March of 1919. We were on the retreat then. There was a lot of times we had to get out on very short notice.

LENNING: Do you remember anything particular about that retreat?

LARSEN: Yes, I remember quite a lot about the retreat from Chenkursk. And we also retreated from another one. We were with this Russian captain, just that small detachment; we retreated from there one night when we got the word the Bolos were coming. And we didn't let the natives we were living with know at all, we just got our window open and we went out the window. Didn't wake them or make any noise--as quiet as we could, and we got out of there. Got everybody out on our way back north. North is going toward home, you know. And so when they came in the next day looking for us, we weren't there. They did the same thing to us a couple of times, too. We were looking for them; we got there and they weren't there.

JOHNSON: Could you hear them shelling in the distance as you were retreating?

LARSEN: We could hear the big cannons. You know, I had a unique experience before the war. I was a machinist at the American Car and Foundry, where they used to make cars for the railroad. And I worked on machines over there that used to turn axels for the big railroad cars. And we converted them to shell machines to turn eleven-inch shells. And they were making them for the Russian government at that time--this was before we were in the war. But they were making these supplies for Russia. Then you get over there and they're shooting them back at you. And I used to know from the flash and the sound how far away they were.

The retreat from Chenkursk, now that was quite a thing. Now they had an outpost probably fifteen miles further out than Chenkursk was, set up to guard Chenkursk, Ust~~o~~podenga. They finally made up their minds to get out of there. So they did all the firing they could. They had some Canadians there, too. And suddenly they left as fast as they could. So they were coming in rout-step, and we were sent up to meet them--my particular company--and we met them at Shegovari.

From there we did the rear guard back to Vistavka, which is probably another fifty miles or more. And we stopped there. And we had been there before, and we had some fortifications, so we immediately used this. We held that place for a week. Then we were totally surrounded, until another company came up to help us--the Fourth Platoon.

And we had a lieutenant--Ray Durham--who at one time was a senator in Lansing, and in World War II he was a colonel in the Intelligence Division. He came from the Upper Peninsula, a wonderful, wonderful, guy. A real soldier. He was a pretty good-sized man, he could pick up a machine gun, a Lewis machine gun, put it to his shoulder, and shoot it like a rifle. There weren't too many who could do that. They'd lie down you know, on a tripod.

Well, Ray Durham came up there with his rifle. There was a ravine there, and when they came up he spotted this ravine and the Bolos were coming down there. They had shelled that thing the day before, oh, tremendously. They just obliterated the blockhouse that was there. And he stood up there on that hill and these guys were coming in the ravine and they came and they came. And he kept mowing them down, he and another guy, standing up there with their Lewis guns. It didn't take too much infantry when those two guys were firing it as fast as they could go. And there the Bolos were, in this hollow. They couldn't run up the hill because we were on the other sides of them. But as long as they were in that ravine, it was his job to knock them off, which he did. And after that we kept slowly going towards the Arctic Ocean again, back toward Archangel.

JOHNSON: When were you at Shegovari?

LARSEN: Well, those guys that had been in Chenkursk, they just went on ahead. So we stayed behind to keep the enemy back so they couldn't attack again. This

was like shoot,run; shoot and run, you know. Not that fast, but you'd be laying there for maybe two or three hours firing at the advancing Bolsheviks; then we would get up and go as good as we could.

JOHNSON: What condition was Company "A", the company that was retreating from Chenkursk, in?

LARSEN: They were well shot up before they got out of there. That company probably had more casualties than any other company.

JOHNSON: Since you were the ones undergoing the brunt of the battle, how did you feel about the officers who remained in Archangel?

LARSEN: Well, there had to be some officers there. How could you feel bad about that? That was their job. That was their part of the army. Oh, sometimes they would send an officer that was up on the front back, and take one of those guys there and send him up in his place--the same as they did with some of the enlisted men--conscripted men, I'd better say.

LENNING: Did you have any contact with the other battlefronts?

LARSEN: We were called the river front, and we spent most of our time on the various rivers there.

LENNING: Did you know where the other companies were?

LARSEN: Well, you always could guess pretty near. Now, we finally got to both sides of the Dvina River--that river is a mile wide in some places. In the winter time, you could haul anything you had across it--you could haul a cannon across it. And so we also did some fighting on the far side of the Dvina River.

But that came long after the armistice. See, like the woods are full of them. That second fight in Tulgas where they attacked us, we were hanging them in the barbed wire, and they still kept coming. We had time to build up some barbed wire entanglements. They either had to cut it--they couldn't take time to cut it--so they were trying to jump over it and things like that, and they were tangled in there. So that's where we laid them out there. And the other gang-- that's the same place where the Canadians reversed their guns there.

JOHNSON: You said before that at first the Bolsheviks were poorly disciplined and easily defeated. Did this change at all?

LARSEN: Oh, yes, yes, tremendously. Because you got all those trained troops that were relieved from doing the fighting in East Germany. The Eastern Front was no more. So when they made their separate peace, that's when we really got into trouble. We weren't fighting kids, or, you know, guys who didn't know much. Then they were real soldiers, with real equipment and everything.

JOHNSON: Do you remember how the Bolsheviks fought at Vistavka, in March?

LARSEN: Well, I think that in March was when we were surrounded. I was just telling you about that--that's the retreat from Chenkursk. Some of the other fellows were like over at Pinega or Omega. They might know the same things I know, but not the same story. It's the same kind of a battle all around, you know. The guys on the railroad, they were in an entirely different kind of a war than we had. They rode up, back and forth in boxcars, or some kind of cars. They had cannons loaded on flatcars. So their war was a little different from us guys who were over on the river. The Bolsheviks had gunboats on the river that could fire at us all the time, and they could outshoot the Canadian Field

Artillery that was with us. They could be three times as far away and hit us, as they had much larger guns against the Canadian three-inch guns.

LENNING: That sounds like it would be a serious disadvantage.

LARSEN: It was.

JOHNSON: What were your first impressions of Archangel?

LARSEN: I didn't see Archangel. I never was in there. All I know of Archangel is what I could see from the boat as we went by.

JOHNSON: You just stopped at Bakaritsa?

LARSEN: That's right. We just passed Archangel and went right across the bay there. Bakaritsa was there--and they had that converted into some kind of a hospital--all the guys that were sick were unloaded there. Then, I presume, that when we were gone up the river, that they transferred them over to Archangel. I don't know whether they did or not.

JOHNSON: When did you first discover that you were going to go home?

LARSEN: Well, I guess when we got back there, north of Archangel. We had communications, and we'd seen where the Bolsheviks were going to drive us into the Arctic Ocean! (laughter) So, fortunately they had some boats there waiting for us. And we saw the boats as we came down there, so we knew something like that was going to happen.

JOHNSON: You didn't know until you got back to Archangel, though.

LARSEN: Yes.

JOHNSON: Did you feel as though you hadn't "finished" what you had been sent

there to do?

LARSEN: I believe we all felt like that, because we all felt we had no business being there in the first place. I don't think that anyone know today purely, truly, why we were there. Some Britisher's pipe dream. Although the thing about establishing a submarine base up there in the North Atlantic probably had some merit to it. But the war had ended even before anything like that was started. It was just talk, or paper work, or whatever.

JOHNSON: The whole time you were there you felt like you had no business being there?

LARSEN: That's right. You know, we felt more we were fighting for self-preservation. Certainly after Christmas.

JOHNSON: When you returned to the 'States, what kind of a reception did you receive?

LARSEN: We hardly received none. But half of the outfit came back two weeks before we did. And I guess they had a royal reception here in the city of Detroit. They were dined, and they marched around Belle Isle and up Woodward Avenue and had a good time here in the city. But when we came we went right on through--just stopped a half an hour down at the old Union Depot. We had a few days in Boston 'cause when we came back we landed at Boston--Camp Devons. So Art Gallagher and I took off and went down to visit Boston. We saw Bunker Hill and a few things over there. We were looking for strawberry shortcake. But we were too late; there were no strawberries left. (laughter)

JOHNSON: Why did you stay longer than the other troops?

LARSEN: I don't know.

JOHNSON: Didn't you get back to Archangel soon enough to leave with them?

LARSEN: We left Russia pretty much all together. You know, they wouldn't send you all out together. Just like going over there, we were miles apart. But there were thirteen boats going across the Atlantic when we left here, and we had battleships and submarines. And you'd see them every once in a while running around--supposed to be guarding us, you know.

JOHNSON: Did you arrive at France about the same time?

LARSEN: Yes. We went to Brest, France after Russia. From there we got to Boston and then Camp Custer.

JOHNSON: After you got back, did you find that many people around had heard about your expedition?

LARSEN: I think at that time our war--the Russian--was probably looked upon as though nothing had happened. Rather than what went through France and all that. That war had been going on for four or five years. And when we entered the war--we didn't get started until 1917. The first contingent that went over to Camp Custer for training was in August, 'cause I went over there in September and I was two weeks late.

JOHNSON: So, what did people think when you got back?

LARSEN: I can't remember that anybody thought anything special. I went back up home and had a good vacation up in Manistee, up on the shores of Lake Michigan.

JOHNSON: Was the average soldier recognized by the higher command for his bravery in action?

LARSEN: There were some medals given out--and in some occasions given to the wrong person. I guess that happens quite often. I know a couple of lieutenants got medals where it should have been a sergeant who was with him.

I knew a Captain Odjard, and he got a medal. And it was a medal that the tsar used to give out. And somehow or other--how they did it when we were there, the tsar was already gone--and he has a beautiful medal that the tsar used to give out. And he died in 1972, and the lady who was his housekeeper, she's wearing it. It's a beautiful thing.

LENNING: As the British contradicted what you felt to be the purpose of the expedition, did this affect your feelings toward them?

LARSEN: I think that created more bad feelings than probably anything else did.

We wore British clothes when our American clothes wore out. You had maybe pants or a jacket--did anyone ever tell you about the Shackleton boots?

LENNING: I've heard that they were slippery.

LARSEN: (laughs) Yes, you did hear! Well, some guy by the name of Shackleton was a discoverer--an explorer--in Alaska. And he developed these boots to wear. It was a nice warm shoe. And so he sent them to us, and we gave up our hob-nailed shoes and were supposed to wear these boots. But we just couldn't wear them! It might have been all right for some guys exploring. He could do what he wanted to, go where he wanted to. But we couldn't fight with those things on our feet! And then they sent us snowshoes one time. We had to learn to walk on snowshoes. And that petered out in a hurry--that went faster than the Shackleton boots! (laughter)

JOHNSON: So, what did you end up wearing?

LARSEN: Those old hobnails again. Same kind of stuff we wore over at Camp Custer. They were a little cold, but at least you could stand up in them. The Russians had the right thing; they wore felt boots. Up to the knee. Thick felt--now where in the world they got them I don't know--but they'd be half to three-quarters of an inch thick. No shoes, just those felt boots.

LENNING: Would you say that your experience in North Russia affected your outlook on life?

LARSEN: Well, I guess if you didn't appreciate this country before that, you certainly would after you'd been there. Because--now I'll have to say again that we didn't live in the good part of Russia, we lived with the peasants, who were mostly not very well-educated. Most of them probably couldn't read or write. I would ask older people sometimes what their age was, you know, and they'd give you some terrific figure. And you'd ask them again--they wouldn't say the same thing every time. And the same way with the kids. I never saw a school-house there. And then again, they didn't measure a town by the number of people like you do here. They measured it by the number of buildings that were there--how many homes. So one home might have three or four kids and another might have eight. And the women weren't dressed at all like you see women here today. I never saw anyone in this country dressed like they were. Their skirt was just a piece wrapped around them and then tied around the waist. And men wore bearskin coats. The front legs were the sleeves; slit down the belly; buttoned up.

But we saw other guys that somehow or other came up from Petrograd or Moscow who were well-dressed. Nice, like chinchilla coats and things like that, fur-lined. See, once in a while you'd see some person, even a woman or two, that somehow, in her younger days, got away and got down there and come back for a visit or something like that. And then they were well-dressed, nice-

dressed. I guess in the cities they probably weren't too bad off.

But out there we were, out in the woods, they could make a clearing of maybe fifteen or twenty acres or more, and they had four or five houses. Out around the houses they would do their farming--right up to the edge of the woods. They had a head man of the village. He was called a starosta. He would set a day when they would start plowing, the day when they sowed their seeds, the day they would harvest. And they raised onions, flax, rye, and potatoes--a little bit of potatoes, not too many. Then he would take this in the fall to Archangel or some other town. There were other towns there, but Archangel was the real city. And he would barter this stuff off and bring it back and then pass it out to the people.

LENNING: How did you communicate with the peasants?

LARSEN: We had interpreters. Polish people could learn the Russian quite easily. And I could do it pretty good, too, with my Danish. I read and write Danish; speak it too. And they have lots of words that don't mean the same thing, but you might pronounce them the same. And then you find out, well, that means so and so. . . . Actually, we learned their language much quicker than they could learn ours. (laughter) You know, for eating, and eggs, and potatoes, and things like that. You would know these individuals so you could make some signs. And cartosky (Kartofel) is a potato, you know, and an egg was yaitsa. It cost fifty cents. Five rubles--and a ruble is worth a dime in those days--five rubles for one egg.

LENNING: How did the expedition's being conducted so mysteriously make you feel?

LARSEN: Well, it was my first experience in the war, so I guess I supposed that's the way it goes. (laughs) It is, as I presume, the same feeling the

guy had who went to France; although you knew all about France before our men went there. We didn't know anything about Russia when we went there.

LENNING: Didn't anyone wonder why they were fighting the Bolsheviks?

LARSEN: Well, we weren't very old. We were maybe--had a few oats to sow yet, and that's part of it.

JOHNSON: Did you feel any bitterness about it afterward?

LARSEN: Oh, I always say it's a nice experience to have had, but I wouldn't want to do it over again--not for the same reasons; not in the same way. I have to believe that some of those people are still living like they did when we were there. No kinds of plumbing of any kind--they had wells to get water out of. And we weren't allowed to drink the water until somebody from the medical corps came and dumped the chlorine in it, and it turned red when they put that in it. Then you were allowed to drink it. But the Russians would just dip their hard caps into the swamps and take a drink, and they didn't die.

LENNING: Is there anything else that you would like to add about your experience in North Russia?

LARSEN: I don't know--I think you did a pretty good job! (laughs)

Oh, at one time--you know, when you stay steady in one place for a short time, you keep sending out patrols. We sent out a patrol; they sent out a patrol. Finally you get to where you begin to meet their patrol in the woods someplace. And you get to be, not enemies, but kind of friends. So we had a--north of Tulgas there--we had a thing like that going on over there.

LENNING: With the Bolsheviks?

LARSEN: Yes, yes. We wouldn't just actually see them, but they'd put things in a tree, there, like a mailbox out there in the woods. (laughter) And we would exchange our notices: they'd say, "You join us," and then we'd tell them to come and join us so we wouldn't have to fight. This is just what the privates did. The officers weren't supposed to know what was going on there. (laughter) Some of them did. And at Christmas time, they put a note in that they wouldn't bother us--they wouldn't fight us on our Christmas if we would leave them alone on their Christmas. And they held their word, but not us. We had to go and bother them on Christmas--just go up to the line where they were stationed and shoot--shoot to make noise--and maybe try to burn them out of a blockhouse.

LENNING: How did that make you feel?

LARSEN: Not good. We didn't really do any good. Nobody likes patrols, but when you're told to do something in the army, you do it--or something else happens to you. (laughs)

LENNING: Where did an order like that come from?

LARSEN: There was no order to shoot anyone. You just make noise--as the British say--just to get their wind up, just to disturb them a little bit. There was not any real harm done. We didn't feel good about it, but we had to do it.

LENNING: Because the officers told you to?

LARSEN: Sure, sure. It wasn't our idea. We didn't want to go at any time, anyway--that's the dirty job. Lots of guys got shot up, going on patrols. You know, they could hide behind a tree, and they could see you and you don't know they're there, and the first thing you know, you've lost a guy.

LENNING: Did you ever talk with the Bolsheviks?

LARSEN: Not out on the firing line. Well, some of these guys who were taken prisoner, yes. Or, as much as a Russian and an American can talk; it couldn't be too much. But the British were usually the interpreters. You see, they outranked us in everything.

LENNING: How did you feel about that?

LARSEN: I didn't like it; nobody else liked it. They don't like it today, even. I don't think that we--I couldn't say that I really hated them. But I would have just as soon've been with my own people all the time. They could be where they were, and we could be where we were. The Royal Scots weren't that bad; I felt sorry for those guys. They shouldn't have been there at all. I think, when they sent them out of England, they thought they were going someplace for a rest.

But they were the most cootiest guys! (laughs) If you know what cooties are. They crawl around in your clothes. If you take your clothes off, they don't bother you. And these guys, they claimed that--you'd see them sitting sometimes at night, looking at their shirt and the cooties are going here and there; they get off your body and stay on the clothes. The Scots were training the cooties! A Scotsman says--you know, sitting there watching them--giving them commands like you do to soldiers! (laughter) So they had a little sense of humor, too.

LENNING: Thank you very much. You had so much to tell us--it's just great!

LARSEN: Well, you should have come around fifty years ago. I could have told you . . .

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