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Levi Bartels Oral History Interview: Polar Bear Oral History Project

Glen Johnson

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Johnson - So what company did you say you were in?

Bartels - 'K' company.

Johnson - Were you on the railroad tracks?

Bartels - No, I was further in.

Johnson - You were on the Dvina, the river?

Bartels - Yes, that is where we were, no the river wasn't it we was between the two, between the two.

Johnson - Kodish?

Bartels - Yes, we was all in there. No, I went off from Muskegon you might say, I have nothing to do with the bunch here out of Holland. I went out of Muskegon.

Johnson - Well then, I guess all of the fellows out of Holland were part of company 'D'.

Bartels - Yes, all of these are 'D' company.

Johnson - Here are some picture postcards that Mr. Slagh had. Different pictures; peasants, etc.

Bartels - Yes, I have a few old cards laying up stairs yet. You see they are cutting logs out of straight timbers is what theyr'e doing. That looks natural.

Johnson - Is that the kind of a house that you stayed in?

Bartels - We didn't have no house at all.

Johnson - What was your housing? Where?

Bartels - We didn't have no house at all.

Johnson - You were just out in the open?

Bartels - Out in the open. I'll tell you the truth about it. Now I dōdn't feel like peddling about it, same time though: Our company was 'K' company you might say, and we had regular army officers you might say, and we was in there, and I wasn't inside a building until Christmas. Out in the open all the time.

Johnson - But it must have snowed.

Bartels - Snow! Good gracious there was no name for it! We was like wild indians is what we was. This is much different than what the people in France had.

Johnson - Well, you must have had houses built sometime.

Bartels - Oh no, we never had a house. We went to, around Christmastime, we want to Archangel you might say for relief, for foods, got different clothes, we had no clothes there to speak of.

Johnson - But what did you wear? Didn't they supply you?

Bartels - Just ordinary clothes.

Johnson - Didn't they supply you with overcoats at all?

Bartels - Yes, overcoats we had and that's all too! They gave us a sheepskinn lined coat one time you might say. Course then the British, they had priority you might say and they took them away from us. Talk about England! I've always said that if we start a war with England tomorrow morning I'll be there. As a matter of fact I've got no use for them people.

Johnson - Were you drafted or did you enlist?

Bartels - I was drafted, yes. I tell you, in the early part of the war I tried to enlist and go to Washington state in the timberland there. Then I was going to be transferred to Holland because in Muskegon I couldn't enlist. So I was transferred down here but they never transferred me on time you might say. That's o.k. too/

Johnson - Here is a picture of Camp Custer. How long were you there?

Bartels - 17 days. That is all we was there. I had to go straight into camp from here. I never had much training.

Johnson - Well, do you think you should have had more training?

Bartels - No, it wouldn't have done a bit of good out there.

Johnson - All the training you went through didn't really help that much?

Bartels - The training they had in camp here, why it didn't mean nothing. It was altogether different than the people that went to France. It was much different.

Johnson - But when did you know that you were going to Russia?

Bartels - When I was in England.

Johnson - So you went from Camp Custer to England. And did you train more there?

Bartels - No, We was there for I forget exactly how long, not very long, maybe two weeks, maybe three I forget already it was so many years ago. Just exercises were all you had to do. We was waiting for a boat to go to Russia.

Johnson - But you thought that you were going to France?

Bartels - Yes, we was counting on it. But then they took so much of what they called the 85th division and split them up you might say.

Johnson - What were some of the first clues you had that made certain you were going to Russia.

Bartels - A day before maybe. They wouldn't tell us nothing, keep it a secret.

Johnson - Who was the leader of your battalion?

Bartels - Major Young was one of them.

Johnson - How about do you remember a Col. Stewart at all?

Bartels - No. Our Captain, Mike O'Donahue, he was a regular army man you might say and we had a few more of them in there too yet. And they knew the ropes you might say. They didn't tell the privates nothing.

Johnson - But did you have any idea what you were doing in Russia when you were there?

Bartels - No I didn't. Not at the time, no. We was just kept dumb you might say. We didn't know nothing, we was like a bunch of sheep, or cattle.

Johnson - What was the trip like over the ocean?

Bartels - We had to go way up in the Artic Ocean in order to get in.

Johnson - Was the passage very rough?

Bartels - Oh nothing went down but it snowed. We had to way into to Artic and the next year in June we left there you might say and we came right through the ice fields.

Johnson - Did anybody get sick at all?

Bartels - On the way over they did. Some got the flu at the time. They dumped them overboard. We had some Frenchmen on board too, there was all kinds of them. There was Canadians and English and Americans. Took a sample of everybody.

Johnson - What were your duties? What did you do?

Bartels - Infantry, the infantry was what we were in. Just wild in the woods like indians, exactly, we lived like wild indians is what we did. I'll tell you that 'D' company, they didn't anything like

our company did.

Johnson - What was your first impression of Archangel?

Bartels - Archangel, when I first saw it, it looked like Northern Michigan. Exactly!

Johnson - Did you get to meet any of the people at all?

Bartels - Oh, we met some civilians there, civilian people are nice people. But the most of them have gone south with the Bolsheviks, just force them in there. There are some old people stayed back there yet.

Johnson - So, did you stay in Archangel for a while or did you go right down to the front?

Bartels - Well, I'll tell you. We got off the boat, that same afternoon, we got off the boat there, and they put us in these old railroad cars, like the coal cars we got here. Dirty them things, you rode in the dumb thing all night, towards the south along the railroad for a ways, and then we cut cross, cross-country. That was where we was.

Johnson - Do you remember any of the towns or villages you went through?

Bartels - Well, there were no villages where we was. I forget all of them. I forget all of the names, but we was out in the wilds is what we was. The only villages that there was were little villages like they live out in the country here.

Johnson - Did you ever stay in any homes there?

Bartels - No, never.

Johnson - How about prisoners? Did you take any prisoners?

Bartels - Oh yes, we took quite a few.

Johnson - Did you talk to any of them?

Bartels - No, I couldn't talk to them, and they couldn't talk either.

Johnson - Did you ever get any propoganda at all, leaflets?

Bartels - No, nothing. We got nothing. We was just like indians. We were just deserted is what we was.

Johnson - How about your supplies? Could you get things easily? If you lost a pair of mittens could you get another pair easily?

Bartels - Oh, I tell you. It didn't serve us to much of anything. Towards the last they even give us English shoes. Exactly,

old boots is what they called them. They wore out. Our clothes too, they looked like rags. Some of our boys like the Russians wore sheepskin coats with the littleppins and stripes of cloth, even put some of those to use to keep them warm. That's what our men did. We had nothing. Dirty those clothes, filthy! For weeks we didn't shave.

Johnson - What about the food?

Bartels - Just as is. Hard tack they call it, fox bisbut, fox biscut is what it is, what you would feed the foxes here. Corn Beef, 'bully beef' If you got some your lucky, if you didn't well then you just go without.

Johnson - How about sanitary conditions?

Bartels - It wasn't sanitary at all.

Johnson - So before you went over did you think that you were pretty well prepared for what was in store?

Bartels - Well I'll tell you, I'm a country man and I've been out doors all my life. I could take it pretty good, I could see things. But some of the other guys, why, just helpless, yes they were helpless. They could'nt do nothing.

Johnson - What was your first impression of Russia?

Bartels - I really can't tell you. We didn't care about over there we knew that we was in it and we had to make the best of it. That's exactly what I did.

Johnson - Do you have any reason why you were over there? Why do you think you went over there?

Bartels - We were borrowed to England. England was the pusher to that whole thing. President Wilson, he was in his second term then of course, and his slogan was too, in the winter months, "Vote for Wilson to keep us out of the war." Well that dirty louse you might say, while he was doing that, the minute he got elected you might say he was building barracks in Ireland there already. He was building barracks for American people there. In England see they, well, the British controlled the whole time, everything. British rations and everything. What England wanted, what I was going to say, they had no timberland or nothing,...See England had no timber whatever, nothing. So that's what, they want timber. ?And they had portable sawmills way back then,

Johnson - So they were exporting lumber all of the time?

Bartels - They was stealing it is what they were doing. The Russian people they couldn't cut their own timber down, they couldn't.

Johnson - What kind of government do you think the people of Archangel wanted? A communist type of government?

Bartels - No, I'll tell you, They didn't want communism, thry just suddenly took over. Thry didn't have nothing to say. We've got the same thing in this country right here, we've got it here right now. It's sorry to say but it's pitiful.

End of interview