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Floyd Lewis Oral History Interview: Polar Bear Oral History Project I

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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
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INTERVIEW I

LENNING: Were you drafted or did you enlist for World War I?

LEWIS: Did I enlist? No, I was drafted.

LENNING: When was that?

LEWIS: Matter of fact, they left my name off the list in the paper when I was all set to go. So I went down to headquarters and told them. I said, "I'm supposed to go tomorrow,"--or the day after, or whatever it was. And he said, "Why, aren't you on the list?" I said, "No." "Well," he said, "we can add your name." I said, "Well, do so, because I want to go." It was that way: I don't know why they left my name off. I had definite plans to join the parade.

LENNING: Where did you train? Camp Custer?

LEWIS: Camp Custer, yes. We had a hurry-up campaign of training, too. Up early in the morning and, of course, army is that way, but it seems they pushed us through all the tricks: target practice, bayonet drill, gas mask, and the works, because we were the last contingent to join the 85th Division that had been building and training all through the winter.

LENNING: How long did you train there?

LEWIS: About one month. We left New York July 22, to the best of my recollections. So we trained about one month.

LENNING: Did you feel prepared for war after one month of training?

LEWIS: Yes, I thought well-enough prepared. Probably had a lot to learn.
You never have enough, I suppose, but I was glad to be on the move.

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

LEWIS: One can conjecture, but of course you don't know anything much.

LENNING: Where did you think you would be going?

LEWIS: Oh, to France.

LENNING: After Camp Custer you went to New York, and then where did you go?

LEWIS: After a week at Camp Mills, on Long Island, we boarded ship and went to England by way of the St. George's Channel there between Ireland and Scotland, and down the Irish Sea to Liverpool.

LENNING: Did you continue training in England?

LEWIS: Yes, we probably had a month of training in England.

LENNING: Do you have any recollections of England?

LEWIS: Yes. The countryside seemed to me was divided up into small sectors of farms, each with its own produce or products; giving it different colors—sort of an interesting patchwork. We weren't flying, but that's what I observed from the train.

LENNING: What was your training like in England?

LEWIS: In England? Well, there were long marches, for one thing. Many of the marchers were with gas-mask drill and full sixty-pound pack. And they had the ambulance following the long train of marching men to pick up those that fell to the wayside. And some did, especially one fellow in our outfit
had asthma pretty bad, and he was one of the fellows I knew that fell out. But we went all the way.

LENNING: Did he make it to Russia?

LEWIS: Yes. But long hikes on the summer-dusty roads of England was part of the experience there.

LENNING: When did you first realize that you were being sent to Russia?

LEWIS: When we were, probably, pretty near the North Sea, it had begun to be rumored around that we were going to Russia.

LENNING: Did you know whether you were going to Siberia or to North Russia at that time?

LEWIS: We had no idea where. It looked like it was going to be a northern trip.

LENNING: You found out through rumors?

LEWIS: Yes. Of course, the direction of the ship was something in itself.

LENNING: What did you know about Russia at that time?

LEWIS: I knew very little about Russia, except that earlier they'd had the war with Japan and they were probably a pretty slow-going outfit, under the tsar. And the Japanese got the best of them 'way over there on the other side, so we didn't think too much about it.

LENNING: Did you know anything about Bolshevism?

LEWIS: Bolshevism? No, I didn't. I don't think it had made much of an impression at that time with me. Of course, names like Kerensky and Lenin had made headlines out of the anarchy that followed the downfall of the tsarist
regime, and the radicals, who we were to know as Bolsheviks, had managed to negotiate the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk when they withdrew from the Allies.

LENNING: Were you given any lectures or information to prepare you in any way for what you would encounter in Russia?

LEWIS: No. It was kept pretty secret. We didn't get any special equipment there, or aboard ship. However, we had an inkling something was up when in England, they had us turn in our regular American rifles and gave us another kind of longer rifle with a peculiar bayonet. We wondered, but took it in stride. Also, it was rumored that our division was in France. What were we doing in England with our division already in France? Of course, a soldier knows little or nothing of general plans of operation, that's the responsibility of the officers. We were just a large family traveling together. What happened to the others was something else.

LENNING: Do you remember when you received the first official words about the expedition's purpose?

LEWIS: We knew we were landing in Russia, but we didn't know why or what for. I know that as I looked over the ship's rail, I saw some people down there on the dock. . . . One fellow evidently wasn't supposed to be there. He got booted out of there, and I mean booted! (laughs) We stayed on board ship for a couple of days, I believe. That's normal procedure, I guess, until arrangements are made, and then, too, our ship was thought to be some kind of a cattle boat. Most everybody was coming down sick. And that flu, before we landed, was hitting. I know that our first sergeant would come down to announce sick call about nine o'clock in the morning, and more and more of them responded. And he was an old army sergeant, and he would sound off with, "If any of you fellows are just gold bricking, you're gonna get double
K.P. and plenty of it!" and such. But, in my own case, my buddy as it was
stayed in his hammock. A British ship accommodates with hammocks for beds and
you have to climb up to get into your hammock, which is an acrobatic affair
to start with. (laughter) And he was just staying there. He didn't want to
come down to eat or anything. He cared hardly to talk. I said to the sergeant,
"Sir, we've got one fellow over here that isn't responding that should. But
he can't; he's too sick." And so he right away got the aids rounded up and
they got him out of there. He didn't know when he came off the ship. Matter
of fact, like many others, when he woke up in a Russian hospital, he was surp­
 prised and considered himself lucky--for many did not wake up.

LENNING: What ship was it that you sailed to Russia on?

LEWIS: What ship to Russia? The Somali. Yes, the Somali.

The Port-O-Lisbo was the ship onto which we eagerly clambered aboard
leaving Russia. I recall that I hung the stern rail to shout, "Do svidaniya
Rossia, do svidaniya Archangelsk" as her white-painted masonry buildings, and
the gleaming golden church spires began to recede, while the props below churned
up a beautiful wake.

LENNING: How many ships were in the convoy?

LEWIS: Well, the convoy going across the Atlantic was thirteen.

LENNING: From England to Archangel?

LEWIS: I wouldn't know that. I wouldn't venture a guess.

The Port-O-Lisbo on which we sailed from Russia was the former Prince
Heinrich, said to be the Kaiser's yacht on which he once sailed around the
world. German origin was in evidence as "Herr Bott", Gentleman's Both, and
"Prince Heinrich" were burned into the oars of the lifeboats.
JOHNSON: You were talking earlier about the Spanish flu epidemic en route to Russia. What kind of treatment did those stricken with it receive?

LEWIS: Well, I couldn't tell you that. They went to the so-called hospital on the ship. And what kind of treatment they got I don't know. Of course, they were up against it probably with the crowds reporting for "sick call." It must have been congested for one ship to handle all those cases because I watched them unload, and one after another was either having to be helped or carried off, and so on.

JOHNSON: Do you have any idea whether there were enough doctors or medical supplies?

LEWIS: I wouldn't know that.

LENNING: You said before that your buddy was ill . . .

LEWIS: Yes, I'll say he was.

LENNING: Do you remember what kind of care he received?

LEWIS: No. If you wanted attention, you were supposed to respond to the sergeant's "sick-call", about 9:00 each morning. He was just lying up there in his hammock, apparently quite feverish, and not caring to get up for anything. It was sort of a tucked-away place that we were quartered in. Realizing that he was a pretty sick man and getting no attention, I decided that something had to be done, and soon. For a raw recruit of barely two months, to approach and get the attention of a rough-voiced regular army 1st sergeant already disturbed by the vast number reporting, it took a little resolution, but I did break in. I said, "Sir, you've got a man over here that's too sick to report." When we landed, he and many others were carried off the ship. He
did survive, but the "flu" took many.

JOHNSON: When did you first arrive in Russia?

LEWIS: The fourth of September. You're cross-examining me! (laughter)

JOHNSON: What were your first impressions of Russia?

LEWIS: Well, first impressions were the dense forests lining the shore--what appeared to be tall standing spruce trees, topped by their slender pinnacles. Our Pioneer Platoon had considerable to do with some of those trees later.

JOHNSON: Where did you go first?

LEWIS: We went into Archangel.

LENNING: Do you remember if there was a parade of the American soldiers the first morning that you got off the boat?

LEWIS: No. If there was a parade, the regimental band was probably in it; they were part of our Headquarters Company.

JOHNSON: How long did you stay in Archangel?

LEWIS: Our Pioneer Platoon was in Archangel from September 4th until we went to the front--about February 11th. We built block houses till the last of March, and returned to Archangel. We finally left Russia about the middle of June, 1919. As to any kind of so-called action, we had a little affair with the "British Legion," what they called the White Russians being trained by the British. They were on our side, presumably, but when they had completed their training and received their uniforms, they were ordered to take their position on the front. They then rebelled, and refused to come out of their barracks--a two-story masonry building they called the "White Barracks." Many of their
buildings were painted white, sometimes over a coat of white plaster. Well, Headquarters Company was ordered out to surround the building and fire on it. So bangity-bang it was: mortars and rifle. By an occasional zing-zing in the air, some of that fire was being returned. They had learned to use the guns, but they were pointing them the wrong way. After an hour or so of firing, they flew a white flag at the doorway, and that brought a "cease-fire."

JOHNSON: Did the White Russians go to the front then?

LEWIS: I don't know how they settled it. I do recall as reported, a number of leaders were executed that night.

JOHNSON: Do you have any idea as to why they rebelled?

LEWIS: Yes. Many of the Russians were poor and in need of food and of clothing. The British supplies were quite acceptable, as well doubtless as something in the way of a small salary to share with the home folks. This much is conjecture, but also very likely, and natural.

However, there was another matter to cause the revolt which was not conjecture, but which I learned from a Jewish girl with whom briefly—we were exchanging languages. I wanted to learn more German, and she wanted to polish her English. Well, this gal made it quite clear to me that they were being ordered to go to the front to fire on their own relatives and friends. And that was their answer: this futile demonstration, by simply refusing to leave the building.

Along in the middle of February—it was still pretty cold in North Russia, a Y.M.C.A. man told me the ice in the fast-flowing Dvina was three feet thick—it was on February 11th, as I recall, that we received orders. And so we as a unit—the Pioneer Platoon of Headquarters Company--packed and took the train some one hundred and fifty miles south to the railroad front. And there we
built block-houses out of these tall spruce trees, cutting them down and trimming them, and building these block-houses with logs laid together four feet thick, which was supposed to stop most any firing, ordinary rifle fire or machine-gun. They thus provided quarters for living for a squad to take over and defend the area. These were spaced along the railroad on either side. Incidentally, there was shell fire landing in around us and the accuracy of the "Bolo" artillery was such that they could cause the British with their heavy gun mounted on a flat-car to back away when they seemed to come too far forward. The blue and red uniformed French with their well-known "seventy-fives" would give the Bolsheviks a lively response.

JOHNSON: What exactly was the Pioneer Platoon of Headquarters Company?

LEWIS: What was it? It was a semi-engineering unit. They said that if we had gone to France we probably would have laid barbed-wire entanglements or nipped the enemy's barbed-wire entanglement to pave the way for the charges over no-man's-land.

JOHNSON: Were you also trained for combat?

LEWIS: Oh, yes. We went through all that training.

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

LEWIS: Not much. The Russians were said to have posted a sign: "Why are you here?" And the Americans had no answer. We don't know! (laughter) Of course, in a general sense, there was the word to the effect that the British had a lot of stores of munitions and food and so forth that they did not want to have fall into the hands of the Bolsheviks. And so we were up there to guard the supplies. That was the best answer that we had heard.
LENNING: Did you ever see those supplies?

LEWIS: See them? Well, I suppose we indulged in them, we ourselves ate from the British. They didn't understand the American appetite! (laughs) Yes—you are putting a good question forth, though. We didn't see any supplies to warrant a whole regiment to go up there. There was not only the Americans there, you understand. There was a sampling of all the Allies: the Italians, the French, the Belgians—I'm quite sure—Canadians, Canadians also were our artillery. And a lot of the Britishers were those that had been on the Western Front, and had been quite badly shot-up, but were recovered and were worthy of light military service. I saw the British only on the artillery train on our railroad front. I did chat with several British Tommies at the "Y" in Archangel, some of whom could show you the scars from wounds received on the Western Front, which they called "blighties," meaning "home," or "cause to go home."

Then, too, I also did see the Red Cross sleighs arriving in Archangel with the wounded after the Battle of Shenkurst. That took place in January, a couple of months after the armistice had been signed on the Western Front. When the announcement of the armistice was given from the Y.M.C.A. stage, our regimental band in the orchestra pit immediately struck up the "The Stars & Stripes Forever", and of course the whole assembly cheered and celebrated, and there were thoughts of going home. But the armistice didn't affect our theatre of operations.

JOHNSON: What were your duties in Archangel besides interior guard duty?

LEWIS: Duties? I don't know that we had any—interior guard duty was it. Although we were, of course, allowed some free time, we were kept pretty busy at guard assignments of the various military establishments about the area:
the American Regimental Headquarters—set up in a technical school, our military hospitals, and our troop billets. All had to be under continuous military guard—involving many post designations and many more soldiers to work the three-way relief of two hours on and four hours off. And those four hours slipped by so swiftly—a freshening up, perhaps a snack, and through the night-time for sure a nap was in order. And that was terminated all too soon by the corporal or sergeant with: "Come on boys, let's go," or something even more disturbing. But to get routed out at two o'clock in the morning with your circulation down, the temperature outside forty below—you've got to step out as if you were going somewhere (laughs) and in a hurry!

JOHNSON: Did you ever guard any Bolshevik prisoners?

LEWIS: No, only civilian. Only civilian, as far as we knew. That was part of our guard duty operation. Of course, this Bolshevism was something that was just sweeping the land and a lot of the citizens of Archangel doubtless had not made up their minds as to their sympathies or allegiance.

On one assignment we—my buddy and I—were the only two guards, but we had quite an army of prisoners to guard. And when we went to check in at the prison, two civilian prisoners were missing.

JOHNSON: What kind of civilian?

LEWIS: They were just men who had gotten in trouble with the law one way or another and were rationed out to us for doing any ordinary work, and we had to guard them. One day we were missing a couple of prisoners and that put us on the spot. We were court-martialed, so to speak, for having allowed prisoners to get away. At an appointed time we were required to report for a hearing. The officer in charge of the court-martial listened as we reported the facts of the case, and readily concluded that we were charged with too
many prisoners, and dismissed the case. Incidentally, the two prisoners, I
learned later, did return that night. They probably got hungry.

JOHNSON: Did you speak with these prisoners?

LEWIS: Yes. You almost got acquainted with some of them. One "Mike" we
used to call by name. He was a big jolly fellow. We'd march them down the
street to the work or back to the prison with the count of: "raz, dva, tri,
chetyre," and repeat; which of course is Russian for "one, two, three, four."
However, more correctly the Russian for "one" is "odin." Yes, we were in
conversation with the prisoners themselves. It was a kind of a free-lance
thing. But they never created a problem that I recall, except the pair that
walked out on us, and back again.

LENNING: These prisoners were put to work for the Allies?

LEWIS: Well, what they did and how much, was not our concern. We merely kept
track of them.

JOHNSON: Do you have any idea why the Americans were guarding prisoners who
didn't have anything to do with the military? Why foreign soldiers would be
guarding civilian prisoners of another country?

LEWIS: Well, Miss Johnson, you pose a good question. It could have been a
happy arrangement between the authorities of each--military and civilian--to
provide busy-work, for purposes of morale. And that's as far as I really knew.
It was a convenience, certainly, and they got a lot of work done. I imagine
the prisoners themselves would rather be out doing something than sitting in
a prison. It gave them a chance to see what was going on around town.

JOHNSON: Were the British in control of the prisons?
LEWIS: I wouldn't know.

JOHNSON: What about the prisoners that you guarded? Were the British in control of that?

LEWIS: Not that I know of. It's all--you're speaking of the things that were over our heads. We were just privates operating according to instructions.

LENNING: Who were you given orders from?

LEWIS: We took orders from our captain, sergeant, or corporal.

LENNING: Did you know where those orders were coming down from?

LEWIS: No. We had a colonel. Colonel Stewart was in charge as the highest American officer.

LENNING: How were the prisoners treated?

LEWIS: Well, we just marched them along. As long as they marched along, there was nothing to do but to carry out instructions. They were no trouble.

LENNING: Did they ever complain about their treatment when you talked to them?

LEWIS: No. They were pretty hungry, I know. Some once worked around the quarters, our company quarters, I remember. And we had a kind of an old garbage barrel that had been collecting from our kitchen, and our jolly friend, Mike, didn't mind skooping from the water on top the fish-bones and the greasy scum, and putting it in the pocket of his heavy coat--doubtless for lunch later. That tended to complete the picture of the kind of happy-go-lucky character that he was. If the others were hungry, they seemed to have better taste.