

Fort Hunt Oral History
National Park Service
Interview with Hans Fichtner by Brandon Bies and Vincent Santucci
April 22, 2010

BRANDON BIES: Today is April 22, 2010. This is an oral history interview by the National Park Service as part of the Fort Hunt Oral History Project. We are here interviewing Mr. Hans Fichtner at his home in Huntsville, Alabama [00:19]. This is Brandon Bies, historian with the National Park Service, joined by Chief Ranger Vincent Santucci. With that, Mr. Fichtner, if we could just start off with your most basic but important information, like when and where were you born?

HANS FICHTNER: I was born in Leipzig, Germany, September 8, 1917.

BB: Did you grow up in Leipzig?

HF: No, I spent only the first three years of my life there, and then I moved to Offenbach [spelled phonetically], which is close to Frankfurt, Germany. Then [01:00] my parents moved away from there to Schweinfurt [spelled phonetically], and Schweinfurt is well known during World War II, and that's where I spent most of my life's, in that area.

BB: Did you go to public schools, growing up?

HF: Yes, I went to public schools and private schools both. I had to go to private school because the ball-bearing factory in Schweinfurt, I could not stand the climate, more or less, of that haze of all the oil where they would treat the ball bearings, so I had to leave the town, so I went to a private school then after that.

BB: When you were growing up, as a child did you know what you wanted to do when you grew up [02:00]?

HF: No, that took a while. Or let's see. My parents wanted me to be something else, but I pretty early knew that I wanted to be an engineer.

BB: Okay. So did you then go to college after you finished with your primary schooling?

HF: Yes, went to college and got my degree, and I was an assistant to Professor Schott [spelled phonetically]. Professor Schott was connected with the television industry, and so I went into that direction and worked for the television industry through Mr. Pre [spelled phonetically], or Dr. Pre later. He was an assistant to Montre Fuladin [spelled phonetically]. Montre Fuladin was the TV authority in Germany [03:00]. So I would not have gone in the other direction if it had not been for Peenemunde [03:08], because I was drafted to Peenemunde later on.

BB: So real quick, to finish up with your schooling, did you receive an undergraduate degree or did you also get a graduate degree as well?

HF: I could not continue because of the war.

BB: Okay. And your undergraduate degree was in engineering?

HF: Engineering. Electrical engineering.

BB: So what did you do when you graduated? That's when you started working in television, you said. You worked there for a few years and then you were drafted at that point?

HF: No, I didn't really work for it for a long time, because then the war came and I was drafted into the Army [03:54], and after [04:00] about six months, I was recruited away from the Army or released from the Army [04:10] to Peenemunde [04:12]. That it was in April 1940.

BB: Okay. So you were only, you said, in the Army for nine months, did you say?

HF: Six months.

BB: Six months. What did you do while you were in the Army [04:28]?

HF: I was a normal GI. I was working in the company corps, which was in between the battalion and the company as a [unintelligible], going back and forth.

BB: So was [05:00] this at a time -- so this would've been -- is this 1939 or 1940?

HF: Thirty-nine. We had the Polish war then.

BB: Okay. But what you were doing in the Army [05:12] at this point, did that have anything to do with your electrical engineering background?

HF: Nothing at all. Nothing at all. I had to be drafted because I was deferred during my studies, and then I had to go into the Army [05:31].

BB: So they didn't -- they didn't draft -- even though war was looming or had already even started, they didn't draft you until after you finished?

HF: No, I had finished already before the war.

BB: Right, okay. So then right around 1940 is when you were specifically requested by Peenemunde [05:53]?

HF: That's right, yes.

BB: So how did someone know? Did they just [06:00] -- were you recommended by someone, or how did that happen?

HF: I think the department which was in charge of Peenemunde [06:07] went through all the universities and looked for the people they could use for that work in Peenemunde, and out of that list I was drafted for Peenemunde [06:20], for release from the Army [06:23] for Peenemunde.

BB: At this time when you were called out of the Army to go to Peenemunde [06:30], did you have any idea at all what was going on there, or what you were going to be doing?

HF: Nothing. Nothing.

BB: Just that it was a secret location, and you were needed.

HF: Yes.

BB: So to make it clear, at this point, you were back to being a civilian again.

HF: I was a civilian, yes.

BB: Okay. So could you describe for us then what happened early on at Peenemunde [06:55]? What were you involved in? What did you learn about [07:00] the project? What did you do when you first got there early on?

HF: Let's see. For the first few months in Peenemunde [07:07] -- well, let's see. When I arrived in Peenemunde, I was assigned to a place which did not suit me for what I had education in. So I talked to [Wernher] Von Braun [07:22] the very first day and said, "Here, it's not the place for me." So he said, "Bear with me. In about two months or three months, we will establish a new unit where we are working in the control system, the guidance system for the V-2 [07:47], and at that time, we will assign you to that place." In the meantime, he assigned me to another place where I had [08:00] general work on the pre-run of the V-2 [08:06] in a normal sense, nothing special. After about three months, then Von Braun [08:15] came through the office and so asked me, "How is that place you want to establish?" "Oh," he said, "it's just the right place you asked me, because we are starting right now to get that thing together." So I started then in that unit for the guidance control for the V-2 [08:39]. That's where I really got my work then cut out at that time.

BB: You said that on your very first day or thereabout, you talked to Von Braun [08:51] to ask him about what you could do or maybe move positions. Did you know who -- had you ever met [09:00] him before?

HF: No. I had a friend in Peenemunde [09:01], and he said, "All right. Why don't you call directly Von Braun [09:05], and he will let you know what he can do, what you've been

assigned to?" So I had already somebody who could speak for me there.

BB: At this point in 1940 in Germany, was Von Braun already a well-known figure?

HF: No.

VINCENT SANTUCCI: You said that at that point Von Braun [09:29] assigned you to a work group that looked at the guidance systems for the V-2 [09:36]. Do you know essentially how many people were involved in that program?

HF: In that group?

VS: Yes, in that group.

HF: Oh, that was a very small group. We were about 10 people. I was assigned to a group. We were three [10:00] people in that group, to design the control system of the mixing computer for the V-2 [10:07], which was a very vital part for the control of the V-2.

VS: And your team of about 10, were you all electrical engineers?

HF: Yes.

BB: So could you describe a little bit then about what happened? Again, you were working at this point on guidance, you said, for the V-2 [10:38]?

HF: Yes. We worked on the control system for the V-2, and what I did with a co-worker of mine, we designed that control computer. He had the back end, and I had the front end in the design [11:00]. My main task was to take the system, what controlled the gyro, to convert that into a usable system where you can control the first and the second derivative of the original system. That meant I had to take a DC system and convert it into an AC system. Otherwise, I could not mix the signals, and that was the vital part of the control of the V-2 [11:42]. That was done or checked out for the first time on the second launch of the V-2, and it worked perfectly.

BB: Were you there for the first launch of the V-2 [11:59]?

HF: Yes.

BB: You were there for that [12:00]

HF: For the first one and the second one.

BB: What were you -- I take it this was an exciting time. I mean, on one hand, you were obviously designing a war weapon, but on the other hand, it was something that really had never been done before, so is it safe to say that there was a fair amount of excitement at that time?

HF: That's right, yes. But, you know, we did not really see it that much as a war vehicle. We worked strictly technically, and we were politically completely isolated from the rest of the country in Peenemunde [12:43], so whatever went on in Peenemunde or in the country, that passed us by in Peenemunde.

VS: Again, what Brandon said, I could imagine that you have all of these [13:00] bright, intelligent people working together, coming up with new innovations and new discoveries, so I imagine that that was very exciting to be working under that environment.

HF: Yes, I think so, yes.

BB: So did you then have the same job for the duration of the war, or did you advance to other positions at Peenemunde [13:24] as the war went on?

HF: When the mixing computer was finished, I went into some other areas, and Von Braun [13:38] told me he wanted me to redesign the circuitry of the V-2 [13:47] for more or less the technical troop use. So I started [14:00] the streamlining of the electrical circuitry of the V-2 [14:06], and that's what I did for the rest of the time in Germany. Actually, I had

to go to Holland and Belgium, where we fired the V-2s, troubleshoot and give advice to the troops what to do in case of problems.

BB: So you actually did travel at times from Peenemunde [14:36] to the actual military launching sites?

HF: That's right, yes.

BB: Any other questions specific to the V-2?

VS: No.

BB: So could you describe, then, as the war went on and things obviously started to loom a little bit [15:00], was there talk of what would happen to everyone at Peenemunde [15:03] if you would have to evacuate, or did it happen all of a sudden, that everything was shut down?

HF: Yes. At the end of the war, we left Peenemunde [15:15] and settled in middle Germany. You know the Dora-Mittelbau [concentration camp] [15:24] underground in the area we settled at the time, but we had nothing to do directly with Dora [15:32] coming from Peenemunde [15:35]. We were just in the same area, and we spent, oh, about two months in that area and then we had to move further south, and we went to Oberammergau [15:55]. That was more or less the end of the line [16:00], because that was a railroad stop. At that time we dissolved the whole Peenemunde [16:08] group and went to different little settlements like [unintelligible], several little settlements, and stayed there until we were overrode by the Army [16:24].

BB: So while you were in these smaller settlements, would you consider that you were in hiding? Did you tell people that you from Peenemunde [16:36], or was this a big secret?

HF: Yes, we were in hiding, more or less, and we traveled under the jurisdiction of General

[Hans (Heinz) Friedrich Karl Franz] Kammler [16:48]. That was at the end of the war, the boss of the Peenemunde [16:55]. He was an S.S. general [17:00], so we traveled under his jurisdiction. But then as soon as we were coming close to the end, we didn't want to be identified as being part of General Kammler's [17:19] Army, so we were more or less in hiding. So when we were overrode by the Army [17:29], we still were in hiding until we were looked for by General [George S.] Patton [17:37]. General Patton was looking for us, and so we surrendered to him and went to Garmisch-Partenkirchen [17:47]. There we were in internment.

BB: So you knew that Patton [17:55] was looking for the scientists? Or [18:00] how was it decided that you wanted to go to Patton? Was this a discussion amongst the --

HF: I think that that came about -- Von Braun [18:10], he was in [speaks German], and he surrendered to the Army [18:17], and then they knew about us, and Patton, General Patton [18:24], he asked Von Braun [18:27] to get all these people together to Garmisch-Partenkirchen [18:31].

BB: So you had heard via some chain of events or some communication that this was being sanctioned by Von Braun [18:42]?

HF: Yes.

BB: At this point, were you with a large group of Peenemunde [18:48] engineers, or was it just a handful of people?

HF: We were several hundred people in Garmisch [18:55].

BB: I should say before you got to Garmisch [19:00], when you were in hiding.

HF: In hiding, I had about 80 to 100 people.

BB: Again, just before we move on, about how long would you say you were in hiding prior

to going to Garmisch [19:18]?

HF: About a week.

VS: Did you travel by train or by motor vehicle?

BB: We went by train to Oberammergau [19:33], and I had a bus at that time in that train, and I took that bus then and went with that bus to the place where we finally ended up. So I had transportation.

VS: It didn't sound like you had the opportunity to take any records or equipment or anything [20:00] with you.

HF: No.

VS: It was all left at Peenemunde [20:01]?

HF: Peenemunde, yes, more or less.

BB: Vince brings up a good question. When you left Peenemunde [20:10], did you have to destroy any of the equipment or destroy documents before you left?

HF: No. We took from Peenemunde that equipment with us to the area in middle Germany [unintelligible] and we left it in there, more or less.

VS: Were you instructed to hide any of this equipment?

HF: No.

VS: Do you remember the approximate date you left Peenemunde [20:40]?

HF: Yes, that was in February '45.

BB: So can you describe then your days in Garmisch [20:53], what happened there, and what was the series of events [21:00] that took place?

HF: Yes. In Garmisch we were interrogated by the Army as well as by the Air Force. So after four to six weeks, something like that, we were asked by the Army [21:27] if we

would be interested to sign a contract, and that was the first time we signed contracts with the Army. I wouldn't say signed contracts; we committed ourselves to signing a contract.

BB: Could you explain in your own words what your understanding was of this contract?

What were you going to be doing [22:00]?

HF: Yes. We committed ourselves to go to the [United] States and work in the States for two years, and after that, go either back home or get another contract.

BB: Were you married at this time?

HF: Yes.

BB: Was there any discussion of if your wife could come with you, or children?

HF: Well, that was a discussion, and the families, they stayed in Germany for a year at least and then come back to meet us, but the first year we were separated. We understood that, and they were taken care of in [speaks German].

VS: Prior to signing the contract, were you [23:00] -- did you feel like you were a prisoner at that time?

HF: Yes, sure, you can say we were a prisoner because we were at that camp and couldn't move out of that camp at all.

VS: Did they allow you to communicate with your family?

HF: No.

VS: And then when you signed the contract, do you know approximately when that was, a date?

HF: That must have been in August or September, because in the meantime we had to -- let me say it that way [24:00]. At a certain time when I was in Garmisch [24:01], I was pulled out with two other people to go to Frankfurt to the headquarters, Army [24:11]

headquarters, to go to the States, and when I arrived or when we arrived in Frankfurt, the officer who brought us there, he put us into Castle Kronsburg [spelled phonetically] and said, "All right. You stay here for maybe three days. It might be three weeks. I don't know. I have to go to Paris for something, and I will pick you up again." So we three stayed in that castle in Kronsburg for about a couple of months [25:00]. In the meantime, then, some of the people from Garmisch [25:07] were on loan to the English Army and were shipped to Cuxhaven [25:15] to fire three V-2s [25:19] for the English people. And on that convoy from Garmisch [25:25] going up to Cuxhaven [25:27], we were picked up in Kronsburg to join that tour, that group. So then we spent some time in Cuxhaven, fired the V-2s [25:45] for the English Army, and then we went back to Eschwege, in my case, and my family was [26:00] at that time in Eschwege. I met my family and there I signed my contract.

VS: So when you went to Cuxhaven [26:08] to fire the rockets, the British were obviously -- they wanted to understand the technology?

HF: Yes.

VS: So would they have you train them and explain to them the technology for the rockets?

HF: No. We just did the work, and they were there and observing it. They were not participating in it. We did it, and we were in three groups to do that kind of work. It was strictly a loan to the English, and then when that was done, we were released back to the American Army [26:55].

BB: Back in Garmisch [26:56]?

HF: No, not [27:00] back in Garmisch, to Witzenhausen and Eschwege. That's where the families were, in the meantime.

BB: So you did get to see your family prior to leaving for the United States.

HF: That's right.

VS: So when you signed your contract, did you feel you had the opportunity to say no? Did you volunteer and want to do it?

HF: Yes.

VS: It wasn't that the American military were pressuring you.

HF: No, it was volunteers.

VS: Fully under your own free will?

HF: Yes.

BB: Do you recall if there were other Peenemunde [27:35] engineers and scientists who did not want to go to the United States? Or did almost everyone want to go?

HF: That group, out of the group in Garmisch-Partenkirchen [27:49] that was several hundred people, a small group only was picked [28:00] to have a contract. We were offered a contract on our expertise. Not everybody got a contract.

VS: Why do you think that you were picked?

HF: The expertise I had in the control systems and in the overall electrical systems.

VS: One last question. Did you ever have any thoughts or discussion about the possibility that you might go with the Russians, or the Russians may capture you?

HF: That was also a part of the problem. We did not want to fall in the hands of the Russians. That's why we were moved away from the middle of Germany to Garmisch [28:49], to get out of the hands of the Russians.

BB: But prior to [29:00] signing the contract, you obviously found out that you had been picked, and you said it was just a small group that was chosen out of the larger several

hundred. Do you know who was in charge of picking the assigned people? Was it Von Braun [29:16] himself, or do you know if it was Americans who were picking?

HF: No, that was Americans who did that, and we had a lot of interviews, interrogations, and out of these interrogations, the American Army [29:34] selected then the ones that they wanted.

BB: And these interrogations, again, this was all going on in Garmisch [29:43], correct?

HF: Right. In Garmisch.

BB: What were they asking you in these interrogations? Was it strictly interest in what your scientific skills were, your engineering skills?

HF: Yes.

VS: [30:00] So when you signed the contract, the war had ended in Europe.

HF: Yes.

VS: This is a very different question. When you were interrogated about your scientific knowledge or engineering knowledge, did they ever ask you anything about the Germans sharing information or technology with the Japanese?

HF: No.

VS: No knowledge of that.

HF: No knowledge.

VS: Do you know -- did the Japanese ever come to Peenemunde [30:32]?

HF: No.

VS: Not that you know. Okay.

BB: I guess now we'll maybe take it to the next step, to your coming to the United States. By the time you came to the United States, there had already been at least one group from

Peenemunde [30:56] who had gone ahead of you. Is that [31:00] true?

HF: That's correct. That was Von Braun [31:01] and I think eight people, and I think they came -- or they went to Fort Hunt [31:12].

BB: Okay. You recall hearing that they went there, or you didn't know that at the time; that's just -- since then, you believe that's where they went, was Fort Hunt [31:25]?

HF: I didn't know it at all at that time. I only knew the people who left, who went as a first group with Von Braun [31:34], and I didn't see Von Braun anymore until I arrived in Fort Bliss [31:42].

BB: We're going to pause real quick because we need to flip one of these tapes.

(End of Tape 1A)

(Beginning of Tape 1B)

HF: -- Schultz [spelled phonetically] [00:05], I think Schwedinsky [spelled phonetically] [00:10] was also one, and Werman [spelled phonetically] [00:13]. That's about all I can recall.

BB: Was there something that set them apart from the rest of the Peenemunde [00:22] group? Were these all section chiefs or something like that?

HF: I don't know on what expertise they were picked. I don't know.

VS: Is it possible that they were captured with Von Braun [00:41] when Von Braun was captured?

HF: No, no, no.

BB: No, because at this point, Von Braun [00:46], he at least spent some time with you all in Garmisch [00:49], correct? Was Von Braun in Garmisch?

HF: Yes, he was in Garmisch.

BB: So all the Peenemunde [00:54] group was together in Garmisch [00:56] and then kind of here and there, groups were funneled [01:00] off and sent to the United States.

HF: Yes.

VS: Did you work directly with any of the first group that went over with Von Braun [01:08]?

HF: No.

BB: So then when it came your time to go to the United States, were you in the second group, or was there still another group that went before you? Do you recall?

HF: No, I was in the second group, and we were shipped to Le Havre [France], and in Le Havre we got the first boat or the second boat leaving Le Havre. That was Argentina [01:54]. The first boat ran over a mine in the harbor of [02:00] Le Havre, and we were the second boat getting to the States. We were a big troop transporter. We had about 6,000 GIs onboard.

BB: Did you say the first boat hit a mine?

HF: Yes.

BB: Were you on the boat when that happened?

HF: No.

VS: Do you know the name of that other boat, by chance?

HF: No.

VS: Do you know, were there any scientists on that or engineers?

HF: No, there was not. They were strictly GIs on the first one.

VS: American GIs.

HF: Yes.

BB: So you were on the second boat. Do you recall about how many engineers and scientists

were on that ship?

HF: A hundred and eight, I think it was, the number, or the number which arrived, I think 108.

BB: [03:00] Of that group, were they all from Peenemunde [03:04], or were they a mix of other German scientists from elsewhere?

HF: That was all Peenemunde.

BB: What were your accommodations like on the ship? Were you kept separate from all of the GIs?

HF: Yes. We had pretty cramped quarters. That ship was so full of people. The GIs just wanted to go home, and they were sleeping on the deck in the open air. It was just go home. So we were in two cabins, and these two cabins were so cramped full, stacked from bottom to the ceiling. You could not even turn on that bunk where you slept, on the back or on the stomach. You could not sleep on the sides, because [04:00] there was not enough room. So we were all cramped in two cabins.

BB: Were you under guard on the ship? Did you get the sense that you were at all --

HF: No. No, we could mingle with everybody we want to.

BB: Did you mingle with the GIs?

HF: Oh, yes, yes.

BB: What's your impression of what they thought of you?

HF: I think they didn't think very much of us. They played poker most of the time. [laughter]
Oh, yes.

BB: But did you get the sense that there was any hostility of the GIs towards you?

HF: No. We were eating together in the mess hall and did all the things. We just joined them.

BB: Did you have Americans assigned to your group who were [05:00] escorting you,

Americans that spoke German or anything?

HF: Not speaking German, but we had a commanding officer who I think was a colonel, who took care of us.

VS: Do you remember his name?

HF: No.

VS: Did you speak English at the time?

HF: No, I didn't.

BB: So you didn't have any group of -- it was just this one colonel who was assigned to kind of escort you along.

HF: To escort us, yes.

BB: About how long did the trip take? Do you recall?

HF: A couple of weeks. We had a bad going over; we had a big storm going through. It was not [06:00] pleasant, but all right. We arrived in the States and everything was calm again, one of these typical northwesterners, you know.

BB: What time of year was it? Do you recall when the dates of your trip were?

HF: October, November. We were in Boston in Thanksgiving; it was just before.

BB: So where did you arrive? You arrived in New York City?

HF: We arrived in New York City, yes, and we were the first people to get off the boat, because they wanted to prohibit that the news people get a hold of us. You know how that goes. So we got off the boat and [07:00] went over to Grand Central Station, and we were in Grand Central Station in a corner there, waiting to see what's next. We were all dressed in our German attire. I had a leather coat and all. It was very obvious where we came from, and it didn't take long; then the news people got a hold of us, but we did not

talk to them at all. That commanding officer took care of us.

BB: Were you instructed not to speak to the media?

HF: Yes.

BB: So there were not any media waiting for you when you got off the boat, but they did show up at the train station?

HF: Yes, but someone must have told them. But in the train station, they just cornered us there.

BB: So then you were going to take trains --

HF: We took a [08:00] train from Grand Central Station to Boston. So it was already late in the evening, and they gave us sandwiches to eat on the way to Boston. In Boston, we were picked up by some Army [08:21] trucks, pretty heavy trucks, so sitting on these trucks, we went to the pier for the ferry going over to Fort Strong [08:41]. But then we were told, "Please don't talk." So our transfer from the Army trucks to the ferry was a very [09:00] silent thing. Nobody was allowed to talk, so we were sitting there and the ferry took us over to Fort Strong [09:10], which is a very short ride. Then in Fort Strong we were assigned to the barracks there.

BB: So during this trip from the train station on the trucks and then on the ferry, you were accompanied by Americans on that trip?

HF: Yes.

BB: Do you remember if you spoke with any of them? I guess you weren't allowed to speak. You were told to keep quiet the whole time.

HF: Yes, completely quiet.

BB: Was it nighttime when this happened?

HF: Nighttime, yes.

BB: So you arrive then at Fort Strong [09:49]. Again, just to recap, this was the entire group, about 108 people from Peenemunde [09:56] all took the ferry over together.

HF: Yes [10:00].

BB: Then what happened when you got to the island?

HF: It was at night, and we were assigned barracks, and [unintelligible] barracks at that time. So next morning we woke up and again it started blowing real hard. We had another, almost this northwestern there, and it was so bad that -- are you familiar with Fort Strong [10:32]?

BB: A little bit.

HF: So it's a lighthouse out there, and the waves of that storm, they were so high, you could see them above the lighthouse, so it was a pretty strong thing. So the island got flooded and we had to move up in the barracks to the second story [11:00] and wait for the hurricane -- not hurricane, northwestern to subside. So Thanksgiving we were there, and instead of having any Thanksgiving meal, we had K-rations, because that was all they had as food for that emergency there, because we were sitting up there for a couple of days.

BB: So this was your welcoming to America, K-rations in a storm.

HF: In a storm. [laughter]

BB: You've mentioned the barracks a few times at Fort Strong [11:43]. Did you get the impression that they were brand-new barracks built just for you, or were they older Army [11:48] barracks?

HF: No, that was normal Army barracks.

VS: In terms of description of [12:00] Fort Strong, assume that we don't know anything about Fort Strong. Can you describe to us in as much detail as you can about Fort Strong, in terms of what it looked like approaching it? Was it a rocky coast? Was it a sand coast? What kind of structures were there?

HF: It was obviously a small island, and what we did, we just walked around. This was a rocky coast, and we walked around and around and just had nothing else to do other than filling out papers. I filled out papers. That was the main thing we had to do there, and other than that, we all entertained ourselves.

VS: There was a lighthouse [13:00] there?

HF: The lighthouse was outside.

VS: Were there any fences at the fort?

HF: No.

VS: Why was it called a fort, do you think? Were there gun batteries?

HF: I think that Fort Strong [13:18] name comes from the maybe early days, maybe after the Civil War. I don't know.

VS: Was there a hospital there or anything else?

HF: No.

VS: Any other people other than the scientists, engineers, and the Army [13:33]?

HF: I don't think there was anybody else other than the Army and us.

BB: And you were given free rein of the island. Granted it wasn't a very big island, but you could go wherever you wanted on the island?

HF: Yes.

BB: You mentioned the paperwork, and that gets to the next point, is trying to figure out what

exactly you did while you were there at Fort Strong [13:58]. You mentioned that you just filled out papers [14:00] and whatnot. What sorts of papers were there? Were they questionnaires?

HF: Questionnaires and our history and what you fill out, personal history and all that. So it was a lot of paperwork I had to fill out, I tell you.

BB: You had mentioned that you had been interrogated when you were in Garmisch [14:26], where they asked you questions. Did they do that same sort of thing at Fort Strong [14:31], or was it not so much interrogation?

HF: It wasn't interrogation anymore.

BB: So it was more the paperwork. Was it technical in engineering paperwork?

HF: Oh, no, no.

BB: It was more your personal history?

HF: Personal history and Peenemunde [14:52] history, where we were, all that.

BB: Did they ask you questions when you were on Fort Strong [14:59], or did you have to fill out [15:00] saying if you had been a Nazi Party member?

HF: Yes, yes, yes. These things were asked us there.

BB: So it's just questionnaires, and they wanted to know dates or affiliations or anything?

HF: Yes, yes.

BB: Again, were Americans helping you fill these forms out, or did you do it all on your own?

HF: We filled it out on our own.

BB: So you were never really questioned by anyone. It was just giving you paperwork to fill out.

HF: We filled these things out in German.

VS: Did you spend time together with any of the German engineers or scientists, anybody in particular?

HF: What do you mean?

VS: Did you spend more time when you were at Strong with any one or two of the German scientists or engineers?

HF: Oh, yes, sure. You have [16:00] your friends.

VS: Who were your friends that you spent most time with?

HF: I had a particular friend, Dr. Schmidt [spelled phonetically] [16:08], and we knew each other for a long time. We were mountaineering together in Germany. That was my dear friend, so we spent most of the time together. But other than that, we just mingled and got to know each other more or better than before.

BB: Did the Americans stationed there tell you what was going to happen next? Did they seem to have information on where you were going to go?

HF: Yes. We were told then that we are now going to Fort Bliss [16:51], and after we were through at Fort Strong [16:56], I don't know how many weeks we were there, but we were not there too [17:00] long, because we arrived already in Fort Bliss [17:07] in early December. So we left Fort Strong [17:15] and we got into two Pullman cars, and these two Pullman cars were hooked on whatever train was available from Boston to Chicago and all through the country to El Paso.

BB: Prior to getting to Fort Bliss [17:45], and we'll get there in a moment, to finish up with Fort Strong [17:49], did you have any interactions at all with the Americans who were stationed there? Did they do things with you [18:00]? Did they do activities with you, or were there sports or anything, whether you did with the Americans there?

HF: No. If I recall, we played some kind of volleyball, things like that, but mostly within our group, but they'd give us the nets and the balls and so we could do something. But we didn't have too much connections because most of us didn't even speak the language.

VS: So was there a dining hall that you all ate?

HF: Yes.

VS: And the Americans did the cooking?

HF: Yes.

VS: Did they have opportunities for viewing a movie?

HF: We didn't see any movies there.

VS: Did they have the opportunity, like a commissary, to buy a sandwich or a piece of candy [19:00]?

HF: I think yes. That's kind of [unintelligible]. Yes, I think we could buy things if you had the money.

BB: Were you given a per diem?

HF: Let's see. That must have started there, because we had some money already when we boarded the train. They must have given us per diem already.

VS: So was there anything in terms of your first impressions that you thought this was very American, an American candy bar or something that struck you as "this is interesting; this is American?"

HF: I think that is too far back that it made an impression on me. No, I couldn't say that.

BB: Did you ever leave the island, or were you there the whole period [20:00]?

HF: We couldn't leave the island.

BB: So no opportunities to go into Boston for entertainment or anything?

HF: No, no, no, no.

BB: Again, about how long do you think you were at Fort Strong [20:13]? You've mentioned a few weeks.

HF: I would say not more than two weeks.

BB: Well, let me tell you, you seem to have a fantastic recollection and memory of a place that you were only at for two weeks. This level of detail is great and very, very helpful.

VS: The Americans, did they treat you well, respectful?

HF: Yes, yes, very well.

VS: So when you were given information about where you were going to be going at Fort Bliss [20:45], was there one American who spoke German to tell you this information, or did they speak it in English and then somebody else told you?

HF: Some of us spoke [21:00] English. Like Magnus Von Braun [21:04], the brother of Wernher Von Braun [21:06], he spoke very good English, and we had some Americans who spoke very good German, so that was no problem in getting things across.

BB: We've interviewed a number of the Americans who were stationed at Fort Strong [21:28] when you arrived, and they remembered Magnus Von Braun [21:34] because obviously he was the brother of Wernher Von Braun [21:37], so they remembered Magnus, and they said that when the ferry came in, he was seasick and throwing up all over the place.

HF: I don't know.

BB: I wasn't sure if you remembered that or not.

HF: I don't remember that, no.

VS: I'll just bring this up. Some of the Americans were actually born [22:00] in Germany, and they were German-born Jews. Do you recall if you met any Americans who seemed

to be German-born Jews?

HF: I wouldn't know at that time, but I knew for sure one guy, Wermser [spelled phonetically] [22:19] was his name, he spoke very good German, and he was Jewish, so very likely he was maybe born in there.

BB: How do you remember his name? That's interesting.

HF: Wermser [22:33] was his name, yes.

BB: And he was at Strong?

HF: Fort Strong [22:37].

BB: Did he go with you to Bliss [22:39]?

HF: No. That's the only time I saw him.

BB: It's amazing you would remember his name. Any reason why you might remember his name?

HF: No.

BB: I don't remember people I met this morning. That's amazing [23:00]. So do you think we've asked all of the Fort Strong [23:03] questions? Is there anything else that you can recall about Fort Strong before we move on?

HF: I think that wraps it up pretty well.

BB: The hurricane that came there, were you frightened?

HF: Oh, it wasn't a hurricane. It was a northwester.

BB: A storm.

HF: A storm. Yes, it was pretty strong. I never had any of that in my life before.

BB: When you came into Fort Strong [23:33], did they give you a medical examination?

HF: No.

BB: Did they have a doctor look at you?

HF: No.

BB: If anyone was sick, would they have someone to care for --

HF: Dispensary? I don't know. I would assume yes.

BB: They didn't give you any vaccinations?

HF: No. We got all we could stomach already when we boarded the ship in Le Havre.

BB: So you got [24:00] those when you were still in Europe before you came.

HF: Yes.

BB: You've mentioned that on the ship, on the Argentina [24:12], there was an American colonel that was with you. Did he go to Fort Strong [24:18], or did he see you off prior to that? Do you recall?

HF: I think he went with us all the way to Boston.

BB: Okay. And then did he go on to Fort Bliss [24:30]? Do you recall?

HF: I wouldn't know. I cannot remember.

BB: That's okay.

HF: It could be him or somebody else. I don't know.

BB: So then could you describe for us leaving Boston? Was your departure from Boston as secretive as your arrival? Were you allowed to talk when you [25:00] left, or was it still very secret?

HF: Oh, no, it was not too secret anymore. We got two Pullman cars and first we started cleaning them so that we could look through the windows. But we always -- we joked that these were the cars that picked up Columbus when he arrived in the States. They were pretty dirty things, and so we cleaned them up to the best we could and then lived in

these two cars for the next three and a half days or what it was. So you could go freely in these cars as you wanted to, and we could go to the dining car for breakfast and dinner, so we could do whatever we wanted to. We had no restrictions, because we couldn't go anywhere anyhow.

BB: There were some U.S. military with you [26:00]?

HF: Yes, that colonel. Other than that, nobody.

BB: Did you know at this point what you would be doing at Fort Bliss [26:15]? Was it made clear to you already what you would be doing at Fort Bliss or why you were going there?

HF: No, not at that point.

VS: Did you know that Von Braun [26:28] was there?

HF: No, we didn't know that either. I don't know when I saw him first. I don't know. I didn't see him when I arrived, that's for sure.

BB: So he showed up sometime later. He may have already been there, but you didn't meet him until later on at Fort Bliss [26:58].

HF: I was only one day in Fort [27:00] Bliss. I went the very next day already to White Sands [New Mexico] [27:06].

BB: Oh, okay, okay. Then is White Sands [27:13] where you were for the next several years?

HF: For a year and a half.

BB: About a year and a half. What were you doing there?

HF: To begin with, we sorted through the equipment what had arrived in White Sands [27:30], all the V-2 [27:36] and V-2 parts, what they got, and the gyros and everything what was necessary. We got most of the assembly line, and that was all laying in the desert, so we sorted out that stuff and the cradle gyros and these things, which were

sensitive as far as weather [28:00] is concerned. We put in bungalows for safety reasons, so they didn't get destroyed by the weather. The rest of it we picked up as we needed it for the firings. What I did in White Sands [28:19] -- let me say, White Sands, the scientific community in the States here used White Sands [28:34] for their high-altitude research, so BIL and [Johns] Hopkins [University] and all these places sent their people and their equipment to White Sands [28:48], and my duty was to incorporate that into the various firings for their scientific observations. So that was my [29:00] direct contact with the scientific community, which was very helpful to me, because then I learned English pretty quick.

VS: Was any equipment sent from Peenemunde [29:17] to White Sands [29:19]?

HF: No.

VS: Any of the gyros or anything come from Peenemunde?

HF: No, no. That was all coming out of Dora [29:26] very likely.

BB: Coming from where?

HF: From Dora.

BB: Directly from the factories?

HF: Yes.

BB: At what point did your wife and -- was your daughter born at that point as well? At what point did they join you?

HF: They joined me one year later. Christmas '46 they joined me --

BB: In White Sands [29:54]?

HF: -- in Fort Bliss [29:56].

BB: [30:00] Were you at White Sands or Fort Bliss, one of the two locations, until you came

here to Huntsville [30:07]?

HF: Yes.

BB: And then you transferred here with everyone else, came here to Huntsville [30:15].

HF: Yes, to Huntsville.

BB: We talked a little bit when we first got here, but just wrapping up, could you say in 30 seconds or so what your job was here at Huntsville [30:28]?

HF: Yes. In Huntsville we started the design of the first Redstone missile [30:37], and that was my job, the electrical system of the Redstone missile [30:45]. I had a lab too for some of the lab equipment that had to be ready for Redstone [30:55], and that was my [31:00] job, the electrical system for the first Redstone [31:06].

BB: Then after that, you also worked on the Saturn rockets [31:10]?

HF: Yes. I worked on all electrical systems, even the Pershing.

BB: Okay. Vince, any last questions?

VS: Yes. When we first came in, you had mentioned the transition between working for the Army [31:30] and working with NASA [31:31]. Can you go back and just state that again, what you thought about first working for the Army and then the move over to NASA?

HF: To us it didn't make any difference. It is just a matter of changing bosses, more or less. But we as a group were reluctant to go to NASA [31:58]. We wanted to stay with Army [32:00]. And I think our higher-ups, Von Braun [32:04], I think they fought it out with NASA [32:13] to stay with Army [32:15] for that long, because we stayed with Army for one year until we went over to NASA.

VS: Overall, was your --

[end of transcript]

Index

Argentina, [Tape 1B] 01:54, 24:12

Cuxhaven, England, [Tape 1A] 25:15, 25:27, 26:08

Dora-Mittelbau, [Tape 1A] 15:24, 15:32
[Tape 1B] 29:26

Fort Bliss, Texas, [Tape 1A] 31:42

[Tape 1B] 16:51, 17:07, 17:45, 20:45, 22:39, 24:30, 26:15, 26:58, 27:00, 29:56

Fort Hunt (P.O. Box 1142), [Tape 1A] 31:12, 31:25

Fort Strong/P.O. Box 2276, [Tape 1B] 08:41, 09:10, 09:49, 10:32, 11:43, 12:00, 13:18, 13:58,
14:31, 14:59, 16:56, 17:15, 17:49, 20:13, 21:28, 22:37, 23:03, 23:33, 24:18

Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany, [Tape 1A] 17:47, 18:31, 18:55, 19:00, 19:18, 20:53, 24:01,
25:07, 25:25, 26:56, 27:49, 28:49, 29:43

[Tape 1B] 00:49, 00:56, 14:26

Huntsville, Alabama, [Tape 1A] 00:19

[Tape 1B] 30:07, 30:15, 30:28

Kammler, Hans (General), [Tape 1A] 16:48, 17:19

NASA, [Tape 1B] 31:31, 31:58, 32:13

Oberammergau, Germany, [Tape 1A] 15:55, 19:33

Patton, George S., [Tape 1A] 17:37, 17:55, 18:24

Peenemunde, [Tape 1A] 03:08, 04:12, 05:53, 06:07, 06:20, 06:30, 06:55, 07:07, 09:01, 12:43,
13:24, 14:36, 15:03, 15:15, 15:35, 16:08, 16:36, 16:55, 18:48, 20:01, 20:10, 20:40, 27:35,
30:32, 30:56

[Tape 1B] 00:22, 00:54, 03:04, 09:56, 14:52, 29:17

Redstone missile, [Tape 1B] 30:37, 30:45, 30:55, 31:06

Saturn rockets, [Tape 1B] 31:10

Schmidt, [Tape 1B] 16:08

Schultz, [Tape 1B] 00:05

Schwedinsky, [Tape 1B] 00:10

U.S. Army, 03:54, 04:10, 04:28, 05:12, 05:31, 06:23, 16:24, 17:29, 18:17, 21:27, 24:11, 26:55,
29:34

[Tape 1B] 08:21, 11:48, 13:33, 31:30, 32:00, 32:15

V-2, [Tape 1A] 07:47, 08:06, 08:39, 09:36, 10:07, 10:38, 11:42, 11:59, 13:47, 14:06, 25:19,

25:45

[Tape 1B] 27:36

von Braun, Magnus, [Tape 1B] 21:04, 21:34

von Braun, Wernher, [Tape 1A] 07:22, 08:15, 08:51, 09:05, 09:29, 13:38, 18:10, 18:27, 18:42,
29:16, 31:10, 31:34

[Tape 1B] 00:41, 00:46, 01:08, 21:06, 21:37, 26:28, 32:04

Werman, [Tape 1B] 00:13

Wermser, [Tape 1B] 22:19, 22:33

White Sands, New Mexico, [Tape 1B] 27:06, 27:13, 27:30, 28:19, 28:34, 28:48, 29:19, 29:54