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Anthony Acevedo oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, November 1, 2008

Anthony Acevedo (Interviewee)

Michael Hirsh (Interviewer)

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Anthony Acevedo: We had the last person that died, and we rushed out when we heard the rumbling, and we headed almost tripping on the grass, on the dirt and all that, to head for the highway. When the Armored Division came back, we were flabbergasted. We thought we were done for, because they were pointing rifles at us, thinking that we were the enemy.

Michael Hirsh: Mm-hm. Is it okay if I turn the recorder on?

AA: No, no, no. Fine.

MH: Okay. I'm talking with Anthony Acevedo, A-c-e-v-e-d-o. So, you didn't even know that it was Americans at that point.

AA: They didn't know that we were Americans.

MH: Oh, got it.

AA: Yeah. I mean, we heard the rumbling of the machine guns and tanks coming. We thought, "Oh, my God, here comes our liberators." But the German commanders wanted to force us to follow them. We were at the end, at a stalemate; we couldn't do anything anymore. Our last buddy at that—what you'd call a barn, (inaudible), I mean, he died,

and the Germans started to get off. They tried to force us by gun to get us to follow them. But we headed—as soon as they left, one of the guards handed over his rifle and committed himself to us, and he said, “I’m your prisoner.” And then, from there on, then we headed out towards the tanks. Just then, they were rumbling close by, and I remember when I got up to the highway, one of the fellows in the tank picked me up by one arm and set me right on the tank.

MH: Hmm.

AA: I was down to about 87 pounds, from 149. Just rolling down the highway, a lady—a girl—had a flask on her shoulder, and she had milk. I’ll never forget it. She offered it, and I drank some of the milk, but it made me sick. My stomach got bloated up, and they had to pump it out when I got to the hospital.

MH: When they say that—I’ve talked to other prisoners, other GIs who said that when they came across death marches, that the Germans just seemed to run off. And that’s what happened with nearly all of them with you, is they just took off running?

AA: Well, they took off. They just felt that—well, the Germans, they more or less felt that the Russians were—they didn’t care for the Russians. They were afraid of the Russians, to fall in the hands of the Russians. They more or less felt that it would be—they would feel that they would be more—in American hands, because they would have felt more secured. And the Russians were more savage.

MH: Right. How did you happen to draw the picture of the death march?

AA: Well, to illustrate my mind, if I could draw any better, I wish I would have illustrated a little better. But what I saw, it was very, very, very emotional. When I saw the people heading from one end to the other trying to fight for their lives, and jump over the fences. They had no other ways to do—save their lives.

MH: Where is this that you’re talking about, now?

AA: Pardon?

MH: Tell me where you’re talking about; when you’re talking about jumping over the fence.

AA: Off the highway, on the death march.

MH: Oh, okay. Right.

AA: When the Germans had miniature tanks, remote controlled tanks, we were pushing and pulling a wagon with our fellows on top of the wagon dying of thirst, dying of hunger, dying of diseases. There was no other thing to survive.

MH: What were the remote controlled tanks all about?

AA: Well, I understood that the Germans had established, was that they had—we were supposed to, I understood that we were supposed to head to Hitler's nest; home.

MH: Okay.

AA: Bavaria. So, I understood that what I heard was clear of the blue sky that they had these tanks shuttle behind us in case we tried to escape. They could blow up a tank, in case we tried to escape. It was remote controlled.

MH: How big were they?

AA: Small. I don't think they were knee-size.

MH: Okay. And how many were there following you?

AA: I don't know. There were several. They were behind us: two, three, four.

MH: What was the first time you ever saw those tanks?

AA: That's the first time in my life.

MH: You never saw them at Berga?

AA: No, no, no. Never. As a matter of fact, this—I mean, you're here. When you hear whispers, and you hear one whisper from the other; it travels among fellows one to the other, and this came up maybe from one of the guards, remote controlled tanks. What's the first thing you think? Your life.

MH: Yeah. It just seems like such a strange thing for them to put on the road.

AA: Right. Exactly. Who would have thought of it? I mean, the Germans had intuition of everything. They were the Gestapo.

MH: Yeah.

AA: We were under SS, the Gestapo. You never heard of it, but that was the worst—what'd you call?

MH: I know the casualty rate for Berga, the POWs at Berga, was higher than anywhere else.

AA: Yes. Yes.

MH: You were at Stalag IX B first, right?

AA: Yes, I was at Stalag IX B.

MH: Did they tell you why they picked you to go to Berga?

AA: No, but I figured why.

MH: And?

AA: I was interrogated for spying on two employees of my father's when I was seventeen and a half years old, when I lived in Mexico.

MH: Yeah?

AA: I don't know if you heard about it?

MH: No, I haven't. I don't know anything about it.

AA: I grew up—my parents were kicked out of the United States at time, during the [Great] Depression. I was about ten years old when my parents had to leave the United States. I grew up in Pasadena, California—

MH: Okay.

AA: —with my cousins, half-cousins. I lost my mother when I was a year and a half old, then my father remarried. When he remarried—well, he was a professional engineer, architectural engineer, lived in Mexico. I didn't think about much. Well, what's Mexico? It was nothing to me, because in those days it was almost like I was oblivious to everything. All I lived for was—

MH: Okay.

AA: Raised in a—slept outside of my house, slept in the garage. Didn't have anywhere to sleep but [to] sleep outside. My half-cousins would accompany me to keep me company. That's that story.

MH: How did you end up in the American Army?

AA: When I was—the American Consulate in Mexico kept after me and kept close tabs, and told me not to forget that I'm supposed to come back to the United States. During that time, in the forties [1940s] right up around forty-two [1942], there was the Olympics in Mexico. My father built a big swimming pool, Olympic swimming pool. I'll never forget the Olympics. There were two students and myself; we used to travel to school in the morning. Get up in the morning at five o'clock, go swimming at that swimming pool, Olympic swimming pool.

And then, that one morning, five o'clock in the morning, we were out there swimming in the midst, and one of my buddies whispers that there's a spy going on, and that radio operators that my father had that worked in that—the swimming pool was a radio operation. He heard the Morse code, and he picked up the message. It said that spies—Baja, California submarines. U-boats were connecting with Durango, Mexico. I didn't realize that Durango had a German colony. Well, I knew the Schrader family—they owned the hardware store—but who would think that they were in operation with the Germans? Not that I know. But they were nice people, and he was our Scoutmaster. He and I worked a lot, because I knew English and I provided all the information I could to show the fellows, the students, the English language.

When that message came through, immediately we got out of there, and I headed to—my father was the director of public works for the state of Durango. I went in and gave him the message that there was a spy going on. So, they were arrested. And so, take it from there until I was captured and I was interrogated—and blue, and I was blue sky. I was in a—crucified. My interrogators put needles in my fingernails [to get me] to talk.

MH: At Stalag IX B?

AA: Yep. That's where I got interrogated. So, what happened was that when they selected 350 American Jews that look Jew, spoke Jew, they had a name Jew, they carried a star (inaudible), and they're undesirables. I didn't know. I mean, a question mark. I didn't know nothing. But then I was picked, probably by the group, to be sent to a slave camp.

MH: So, they found out about you turning in the people in Durango.

AA: Yeah.

MH: I had read in one book that, in addition to the Jews, they were also sending Catholics. So, they were sending Jews, Catholics, and troublemakers.

AA: Exactly, undesirables.

MH: Undesirables. Okay. So, that was you.

AA: That was me. (laughs)

MH: (laughs) I'm glad you can laugh about it now.

AA: What can I do? (laughs)

MH: Yes. Well, (laughs) I'm sorry.

AA: No, but this is a deep story to the whole thing, because it does make life—you can say more, the feelings, the subjections, the way you were subjected to it. Being a medic is worse, and trying to do the medic is worse.

MH: Did they let you operate as a medic in Berga, or did you have to work the tunnels, too?

AA: No. No, I didn't have to work in the tunnels, but I kept records to see that the fellows were kept alive. And I tried to maintain a schedule, so that they can vary the personnel in and out, but they wouldn't let me. There's a lot of details to that.

MH: You didn't have any medicine or anything else to work with, did you?

AA: I only had sulfas with me all the time, and morphine.

MH: Did the Germans give you that?

AA: No, I carried it with me.

MH: So, when you went to Berga, you still had it?

AA: I still had it with me.

MH: I'm surprised they didn't search you and take it away from you.

AA: Being a medic, they shouldn't have.

MH: Huh.

AA: I tried to hide them.

MH: So, you had it what, in your field jacket?

AA: I had them in my field jacket, in my pouch, in between my—in the seams of my pants.

MH: Amazing. Being a medic has to be one of the toughest jobs in combat. I was—

AA: Yeah, especially when I wanted to operate on one of the fellows before we headed for that death march. When I was told—I wanted to operate on that fellow because he wasn't going to make it. There were six fellows seriously ill, heading for a British hospital. This one fellow had diphtheria. He couldn't breathe anymore; he wasn't going to make it. I asked the guard if I could operate on him, put a tracheotomy. He called the commander, the commander came over and he stood there, and I told him, "If I don't operate, you're going to kill him." He got the rifle and beat me to a pulp, and hit me right square in the face, in the jaw, the neck.

MH: That was Metz¹?

AA: Yeah.

MH: And the man died.

AA: Oh, yeah, he died. He couldn't breathe anymore. I was going to use my fountain pen as a tracheotomy.

¹ Nazi Commander Erwin Metz, who headed the Berga camp.

MH: Right. How much advance notice did they give you before they started the death march?

AA: Oh! “We’re going tomorrow, leaving tomorrow. Get up in the morning. We’re leaving.”

MH: Okay. Now, I have one other strange question to ask you. When the American aircraft would go overhead, when they were going on the mission to bomb Dresden and there were a thousand planes going overhead, were those planes going over at daytime or at nighttime?

AA: Sometimes they were in daytime, depending on the clarity of the skies. I mean, you could feel the hinges of the windows coming apart.

MH: From the vibration from the planes?

AA: From the vibration, yes.

MH: How did that make you feel when you saw that, or felt that?

AA: We were emotional. We cried. We made the sign of the cross—I’m a Catholic.

MH: Right.

AA: They would be—a guard, an Austrian guard—they’re very Catholic. They would look up at the sky and made the sign of the cross and said, “Oh, God, help us.” They were glad to see our planes bombing.

MH: The Austrian guards were?

AA: Yeah. Oh, yeah. But they had to treat us as bad as the Germans, otherwise they would get punished.

MH: Okay. All right, well, I thank you very much for talking to me. I really appreciate it.

AA: Anytime.

MH: I'll send you an email with my address, and I'll tell you a little bit about the book.

AA: Okay.

MH: When you have time, if you could send me that drawing. And I'd also like to get a picture of you, but I'll put it in the email. Okay?

AA: Sure.

MH: All right. Thank you very much, Tony. I sure appreciate you calling me back.

AA: It was a pleasure.

MH: Okay. I will talk to you.

AA: Thank you.

MH: You're welcome, sir. Thank you for everything you did, too.

AA: Thank you.

End of interview