

9-10-2008

## Wayne Armstrong oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, September 10, 2008

Wayne Armstrong (Interviewee)

Michael Hirsh (Interviewer)

Follow this and additional works at: [http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/hgstud\\_oh](http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/hgstud_oh)

 Part of the [African Languages and Societies Commons](#), [History Commons](#), [Other Languages, Societies, and Cultures Commons](#), [Race, Ethnicity and post-Colonial Studies Commons](#), and the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

---

### Scholar Commons Citation

Armstrong, Wayne (Interviewee) and Hirsh, Michael (Interviewer), "Wayne Armstrong oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, September 10, 2008" (2008). *Digital Collection - Holocaust & Genocide Studies Center Oral Histories*. Paper 29.  
[http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/hgstud\\_oh/29](http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/hgstud_oh/29)

This Oral History is brought to you for free and open access by the Digital Collection - Holocaust & Genocide Studies Center at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Digital Collection - Holocaust & Genocide Studies Center Oral Histories by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact [scholarcommons@usf.edu](mailto:scholarcommons@usf.edu).

# **COPYRIGHT NOTICE**

**This Oral History is copyrighted by the University of South Florida Libraries Oral History Program on behalf of the Board of Trustees of the University of South Florida.**

**Copyright, 2011, University of South Florida.  
All rights, reserved.**

**This oral history may be used for research, instruction, and private study under the provisions of the Fair Use. Fair Use is a provision of the United States Copyright Law (United States Code, Title 17, section 107), which allows limited use of copyrighted materials under certain conditions. Fair Use limits the amount of material that may be used.**

**For all other permissions and requests, contact the UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH FLORIDA LIBRARIES ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM at the University of South Florida, 4202 E. Fowler Avenue, LIB 122, Tampa, FL 33620.**

Concentration Camp Liberators Oral History Project  
Oral History Program  
Florida Studies Center  
University of South Florida, Tampa Library

Digital Object Identifier: C65-00005  
Interviewee: Wayne Armstrong (WA)  
Interviewer: Michael Hirsh (MH)  
Interview date: September 10, 2008  
Interview location: Conducted by telephone  
Transcribed by: Kathy Kirkland  
Transcription date: October 18, 2008  
Audit Edit by: Mary Beth Isaacson, MLS  
Audit Edit date: January 19, 2010  
Final Edit by: Kimberly Nordon  
Final Edit date: January 20, 2010

[Transcriber's note: The Interviewee's personal information has been removed, at the request of the Interviewer. This omission is indicated with ellipses.]

**Michael Hirsh:** Okay. Your name is Wayne Armstrong? W-a-y-n-e A-r-m-s-t-r-o-n-g?

**Wayne Armstrong:** Yes.

MH: What's your address, please?

WA: ...Yeah.

MH: And your phone is...

WA: That's right.

MH: And you were with Company C of the 255<sup>th</sup> Regiment, 63<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division.

WA: Company C.

MH: Right. What's your date of birth?

WA: 10-21-22 [October 21, 1922].

MH: Twenty-two [1922]. When did you go in the Army?

WA: In the Army?

MH: Yes.

WA: December of forty-two [1942].

MH: Of forty-two [1942]. Where did they send you?

WA: Camp Van Dorn.

MH: What unit did you join after basic?

WA: Pardon?

MH: After basic training, what unit were you in?

WA: C Company, 394<sup>th</sup> Infantry, 99<sup>th</sup> Division.

MH: 99<sup>th</sup> Division. Who did you go to Europe with?

WA: 63<sup>rd</sup>.

MH: With the 63<sup>rd</sup>. When did you get to Europe?

WA: December forty-four [1944].

MH: December forty-four [1944]. And you were a rifleman?

WA: Yes, squad leader.

MH: Squad leader. So, what was your rank by then?

WA: Eventually, it was staff sergeant.

MH: Okay. At that point, had they told you anything about the concentration camps?

WA: No.

MH: You didn't know anything about them at all?

WA: No, it was a total surprise.

MH: So, tell me about discovering them. What did you find?

WA: Well, it was toward the end of the war, and we was down in Bavaria, come into Landsberg. We were moving pretty fast, and we were—the foot soldiers were riding on the outside of tanks. We came to this camp, and the gates was open, and in we went, and saw all these people in these—we called them pajamas: blue and white striped. It was unbelievable. We just—the tanks stopped, and everybody's staring at these people. They looked like they was walking dead, almost. And corpses piled on flatcars, and we didn't know what to make of it, you know.

MH: Where were you riding on the tank?

WA: Up on the top.

MH: Up on the top. And the tank went in the gates?

WA: Yeah.

MH: This is from the 10<sup>th</sup> Armored or 12<sup>th</sup> Armored?

WA: What?

MH: The tank was from the 10<sup>th</sup> Armored Division, or the 12<sup>th</sup> Armored Division?

WA: Well, for a while, we was with the 10<sup>th</sup>, but I don't know at that particular time whether we were still with them or not.

MH: Okay. So, you get off the tank, and what's going through your head?

WA: Well, you know, these people looked like they was starving. We started giving them stuff out of our K rations. And it was not too long—word came down not to give them anything. There was too much calories, and they couldn't digest it. It was the wrong thing to feed people. But we didn't know it, you know, and we felt sorry for them.

MH: How do you deal with seeing people in front of you who you know are starving to death, and you're told you can't give them food because it'll kill them?

WA: Well, it was tough, you know. They were just walking around like they was in a fog, shuffling around, and their bones was sticking out. We couldn't figure out how anybody could treat people like that.

MH: You talked about it with your buddies?

WA: Oh, yeah. We couldn't believe we was in a place like this.

MH: Do you remember any of the things that were said? I know it's a long time ago.

WA: Well, we just discussed—you know, we couldn't hardly believe what we was seeing.

MH: Was anybody able to explain it?

WA: No, it was—we'd heard rumors that they had slave labor, but the slave labor they had was in factories, and they fed them enough to keep them working, you know. We'd run into a lot of that.

MH: You saw slave labor camps before you got to Landsberg?

WA: Oh, yeah.

MH: Tell me about those. What did you see?

WA: Well, in Hamburg, there was barbed wire enclosures with sections segregated. There was factories there, and I guess they worked in the factories. When we got there, the Germans had left, and the men and the women of the camps, they got together, you know, and they was—well, the lieutenant come got me, and we went in one camp looking for some Gestapo agent. We had flashlights and was in this building, and they didn't pay any attention to us. But most of them was laying on the floor fornicating, and they didn't pay any attention to us. We found the Gestapo man in there, took him prisoner, and then got out of there.

MH: That must've been a really strange sight to see.

WA: Oh, yeah, it was. You know, just crazy. I couldn't believe—I think they had slave labor doing most everything. They had underground factories.

MH: Did you see any of those underground factories?

WA: Yeah. In fact, they sent me—my squad—that was right after the war—up by Mosbach to this underground factory. It was halfway up the mountainside, and the tunnels went back in there. They built airplane engine blocks; they were aluminum. God, I don't know, they was six feet long or something. Just the blocks is all they made there. And there was all kind of machinery, and most of the machinery was from the United States.

MH: Really?

WA: Cincinnati Milling. Had the nameplates right on them.

MH: I'd never heard that. This was after the war that you saw these?

WA: Yeah, there wasn't anybody in these factories then. They was empty, but we was up there, I don't know, guarding it for some reason. I don't know. And all the brass—you know, Air Force and all kind of generals and stuff coming there to see this place, and I had to conduct them on tours.

MH: You were the tour director?

WA: Well, you know, they wanted to see all of it, and I was there with my squad, and so it was up to me. I had to take them around. This thing branched out and went different directions. It was a big place.

MH: Where was that near?

WA: I think it was near Mosbach.

MH: Mosbach. What about when the war was still going on, in the final months? Did you see any of those in the mountain, those factories and tunnels?

WA: No, I don't believe so.

MH: What about any other places where they were using slave labor?

WA: Well, they used a lot. But I don't know. I don't remember. A lot of them was abandoned and people had taken off, you know.

MH: Mm-hm. The slave laborers were gone already?

WA: Yeah.

MH: Except for that one time when you had to look for the Gestapo guy?

WA: Yeah. Yeah, they were still there; I don't know why they didn't leave. The only place they left was the mix-up with the opposite sex, you know.

MH: To go back to Landsberg for a minute, how long did you spend inside the camp there?

WA: How long what?

MH: How long were inside Landsberg?

WA: Oh, we was there a day or two. But I think we got relieved there, and we pulled back for occupation duty.

MH: Inside Landsberg, did you talk to any of the inmates?

WA: No, they weren't capable of talking.

MH: You mean because they were weak or they just didn't speak the language?

WA: Both. Now, I had a letter about maybe six or eight years ago from one of them, and he was in this country; in fact, I think he was in Maryland. Somehow, he got my name and address and wrote me a thank you letter for liberating him from this camp. And this was a satellite camp; it wasn't one of the main camps. It was bad enough, you know. And he wrote this letter, and he came to this country and said he joined the Army and was in Korea, so he must've been pretty young when he was in the one that we liberated.

MH: Right. Did you ever write back to him, or talk to him?

WA: Yeah, I wrote back to him, but I never heard from him again.

MH: What was it like to get a letter—this had to be what, forty years, forty-five years after the war?

WA: Yeah, probably fifty.

MH: Fifty? So, what's it like to have that sort of come back into your life?

WA: Well, it was rather surprising. I didn't figure any of them people lived that long, you know. He must've been a young one or something.

MH: But do you still have the letter?

WA: Well, I probably do, but the trouble is finding it. It's probably down in my basement somewhere.

MH: I know—

WA: I'll look for it and see if I can find it.

MH: Okay. When you came back to this country, when did you get out of the Army?

WA: Well, actually, I was on my way to the Pacific, and I went to Camp Lucky Strike, which was in Le Havre, France. We waited for a ship, and we was there for, I think, most of July of forty-five [1945] and part of August. We finally got a ship, and we was gonna go to the States for thirty days, and then we was going to ship out to Japan. And then, halfway across is when they dropped the bomb and they surrendered, and the war was over, you know. Then we came into Boston, and they really gave us a rousing welcome, you know. (laughs)

MH: What'd they do for you?

WA: Well, they had the fireboats out in the harbor, and the train whistles was blowing, and they had people down on the dock and bands, passing out doughnuts and coffee and stuff. And we went to Camp Myles Standish, which is somewhere near Boston, I guess,

but was only there a short time. We got on the train, and they highballed us all the way through to Camp Atterbury, Indiana, and then come right through my town to go there.

MH: Which town was that?

WA: It was Indianapolis, where Atterbury was, but we went through Columbus, where I lived, to get there. Then I went home on a thirty-day furlough, got married, and then they wired me fifteen more days. And I thought, “Well, I might have enough points to get out.” I went back and I was two points short, so they said, “You gotta go to Texas.”

MH: For two points?

WA: Yeah. So, I went to Austin, Texas, Camp Swift, and 2<sup>nd</sup> Division, Arrowhead Division—Indianhead Division. And I was there thirty days, and then they discharged me and I got to go home.

MH: What’d you do when you got home? What was your civilian job?

WA: Well, I worked at Timken Roller Bearings for about a year, and then I went to work for the local power company and eventually got into engineering there, designing power lines and so forth.

MH: When did you finally retire?

WA: Eighty-three [1983].

MH: Eighty-three [1983]. You have children?

WA: Yeah, I have three boys and a girl.

MH: Okay. Do you recall when it was after you came home that you told your wife or your kids about the things you had seen in Germany, about the camps or about the slave labor places?

WA: Oh, gee, I don't know. Well, I was married twenty-one years to my first wife; she died suddenly from a heart attack, and I had two boys then. One was eleven, one was fourteen. I don't know. I don't know when I told them. Probably after ten or fifteen years or something.

MH: Yeah. Have you ever run into people who say the Holocaust didn't happen?

WA: Well, not personally, but I've heard people quoted in the newspaper that it didn't happen. But they're crazy, because I saw it.

MH: Yeah. Is it the sort of thing that comes back to you every so often, or do you manage to put it out of your head?

WA: Well, it did for a few years, but it don't anymore.

MH: Okay. All right. Anything else you remember about it, about the camps or the slave labor places?

WA: Well, just the conditions. They was—and how they—the thing over the gate, some laborer "*macht frei*."

MH: "*Arbeit mach frei*." Yeah.

WA: I'll tell you one thing: some of us went to the commandant's office, and, of course, all them Germans had left. And there was a big metal—I think it was bronze or something—swastika up on top of the building. We sat on a knoll and used our rifles and shot that thing until it fell off and fell down on the ground.

MH: Were the prisoners watching you do this?

WA: Watching us?

MH: Yeah.

WA: No, that was kind of an area they weren't allowed in. I guess they still thought they weren't, I don't know.

MH: How far away were you shooting from?

WA: Oh, not very far. Just across the road from the building. It was real nice there, grassy knoll, and the building was real fancy.

MH: How long did it take you guys to shoot it down?

WA: Well, it was a good while; that thing was about a half-inch thick. Probably half an hour at least.

MH: I guess that's one way to get rid of the anger.

WA: Yeah, that's what it was, really.

MH: I've talked to guys who said that after they saw the camps, they didn't take prisoners anymore.

WA: Well, actually, we weren't in combat that much after we saw—we only saw that one camp.

MH: Right. But, I mean even the slave labor places.

WA: Well, I don't know of any that didn't take prisoners.

MH: Do you have a photograph of yourself from World War II?

WA: Yeah, I probably could find one.

MH: What I'd like to do—your email address is....

WA: Right.

MH: If I send you my address, do you think—I could actually send you an envelope, if you'd like. If you could send me a photo from World War II and from now, I'll copy them on the computer and send them back to you.

WA: All right.

MH: And if you could find that letter—I know that's going to be a search, because if somebody told me I had to find something in my garage, it'd take a while.

WA: (laughs)

MH: So, I understand that. But if there's—

WA: Well, we moved here fifteen years ago and put stuff in the basement, and we meant to go down there and sort it out and get rid of stuff, and I don't think we ever touched anything.

MH: I know that feeling.

WA: It's about time we did it.

MH: Well, listen, if you can find it and make a copy and send it to me, or send me the original, I'll copy it and send it back. But I'll send you an email with my address and the information about the book I'm writing. And if you could find a picture, that'd be great. Okay?

WA: You want a picture in the States?

MH: No—well, if you have one from Germany, that'd be great, but if you don't have one from when you were in Germany, but just something, you know, when you're in a uniform, that'd be good.

WA: Yeah, I found a camera over there in Germany. I had a hard time finding any film, and the quality isn't too good, but—

MH: You didn't take any pictures in the camp, did you?

WA: No.

MH: No? Okay. Well, I'll send you an email, and if you can find a photo from that era, that'd be great—and a current one, as well.

WA: Okay.

MH: Okay, I'll send the email tonight.

WA: All right.

MH: There's no rush for you to do this, so if you can get it in the next month or two that'd be great.

WA: When's your book coming out?

MH: The book—I have to finish writing the book by next May, and the book will come out in early 2010. I've been working on it now for about five months. Writing books takes a long time.

WA: I'll bet.

MH: I could do it faster, but the publishers are slow. They like to plan way in advance.

WA: Have you written other books?

MH: Yes, I have. This is my sixth book. I was embedded with Air Force pararescue units in Afghanistan and Pakistan at the end of 2002 to write a book called *None Braver*. I've written one Vietnam book—I'm a Vietnam vet. I was with the 25<sup>th</sup> Division in Vietnam. I wrote another rescue book about a unit that went to the rescue of a ship that sunk in the north Atlantic. And I wrote a book about the Terri Schiavo case; I wrote the book for Michael Schiavo, who is the husband of Terri Schiavo.<sup>1</sup> That was in the news a couple years ago. So, it's what I do.

WA: That's great.

MH: Thank you. So, I'll send you this email as soon as I hang up.

WA: You live in Pensacola?

MH: No, I live in Punta Gorda.

WA: Punta Gorda.

MH: Yeah, I live where Hurricane Charley hit four years ago.

WA: We went in there last December on the Skybus. (laughs)

MH: Yeah, exactly. Skybus—the late, lamented Skybus. I wish they still had it. Yeah, Skybus lands—or landed—ten minutes from my house.

WA: Really?

MH: Yep.

WA: Yeah, we was down in Fort Myers Beach for, oh, I guess about a week or ten days or something, in December. We landed there in Punta Gorda.

---

<sup>1</sup> *None Braver: U.S. Air Force Pararescuemen in the War on Terrorism; A Sniper's Journey: The Truth About the Man Behind the Rifle; Pararescue: The Skill and Courage of the Elite 106<sup>th</sup> Rescue Wing; and Terri: The Truth.*

MH: Yeah, Skybus was a great bargain.

WA: It looked like they got that all ready for Skybus, and then they went bust.

MH: They went bust. Now we're getting a new airline, they say, called Direct Air, but we don't know where they're flying from yet.

WA: That was a pretty good deal, that Skybus. I'm sorry to see them go out of business.

MH: You and me both. I never had a chance to fly them. I was trying to get tickets to go up to Massachusetts on them, and then they went bust. So—

***End of interview***