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Kenneth Ayers oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, October 12, 2008

Kenneth Ayers (Interviewee)

Michael Hirsh (Interviewer)

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[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. Just so I have it, your name is Kent Ayers? K-e-n-t A-y-e-r-s?

Kenneth Ayers: No, K-e-n-n-e-t-h. Kenneth.

MH: Okay. Let me start all over. Kenneth?

KA: Kenneth.

MH: And spell your last name.

KA: A-y-e-r-s.

MH: A-y-e-r-s. And what's your address, please? ...And what's your date of birth?

KA: May 21, 1919.

MH: Okay.

KA: I'm eighty-nine and a half years old.

MH: You're eighty-nine and a half, about to hit ninety.

KA: Yeah. And also I'm a major of the Army, retired.

MH: You're a U.S. Army major, retired.

KA: Yes.

MH: And you were with the 84th Infantry Division in World War II?

KA: Yes, Company A, 333rd.

MH: And you got to Salzwedel, S-a-l-s-w-e—

KA: Yes, we led the attack on Salzwedel.

MH: Okay. So, just tell me, where were you before you went in the service?

KA: Well, I was probably in Florida.

MH: In Florida? And were you drafted, or did you enlist?

KA: No, I enlisted in 1937.

MH: In 1937?

KA: Yes, sir.

MH: So, you were in well before the war.

KA: Oh, yes. I went to Fort Benning with the National Guard of West Palm Beach, and we were federalized—it was Company C, 124th Infantry, and we were federalized with the 31st Division on November 20, 1940. That was a square division, if you remember, and they made triangle divisions out of them, so they took our regiment and separated it from the other three regiments and sent us as special troops to Fort Benning as demonstration troops, and that was one year. We went to [Camp] Blanding first—that was in 1940—Camp Blanding, Florida and then [after] a year there, then we went up to Fort Benning. I was the only one left in the outfit who had a high school education, so they made me go to OCS [Officer Candidate School].

MH: You were what, one of the ninety-day wonders?

KA: That's exactly right.

MH: And you came out of Infantry OCS?

KA: Right.

MH: And then what happened?

KA: Class 181.

MH: Say that again?

KA: Class 181.

MH: Class 181. And then what happens to you?

KA: November—let's see, what was that? November 20, I guess it was, is when I graduated.

MH: You graduate from OCS, and where do they send you?

KA: I went to Camp Wheeler, Georgia, training troops. And this is—I don't know whether you want to print this. I was a Southern boy, and they sent me over to a colored regiment.

MH: How does that work out?

KA: Well, being a Southern boy, they knew that I had an idea of how to handle the blacks, and so it worked out fine. I stayed there one year and was reassigned to the 84th Infantry Division at Camp Claiborne, Louisiana.

MH: Where were you when the U.S. entered the war?

KA: When it entered the war—where was I? (laughs) Tallahassee, Florida, as a soldier out of Fort Benning, but I wasn't assigned. We were at Fort Benning.

MH: Got it. At what point did they send the 84th over to Europe?

KA: We left—let's see—forty—we just—Ma! When did we go—when did you go out to Camp Claiborne when we were going to go overseas? What year was that? Forty-four [1944]? Forty-four [1944]. When you came out to Camp Claiborne, you knew we were going overseas somewhere. Was that forty-four [1944]? Had to be. Yeah, 1944.

MH: So, you went over on a troop ship.

KA: Right.

MH: And where did the ship land?

KA: In Scotland.

MH: So, you were there before D-Day.

KA: No.

MH: No?

KA: No, it was right after D-Day. After Scotland, we went down from there to England and stayed about, oh, probably a month, and went overseas into France. We already—our first engagement in battle was in Geilenkirchen, Germany.

MH: What was that experience like, being in your first combat situation?

KA: Say that again?

MH: Tell me about being in combat for the first time.

KA: Oh. We were attached to the British Army. We were on the British right flank and Americans on the left flank. I think it was the 9th Army, but I'm not real sure about that. And it was the first time they had used spotlights flashed onto clouds at night; it opened up the front just like it was daylight. Are you familiar with that?

MH: I've read about that while I was researching the book, yeah, but I've never talked to anybody who saw it.

KA: I was there. The English, their spotlights, and it was right at this time. We were lined up around Geilenkirchen on a railroad; the railroad was a little bit higher, sort of circled Geilenkirchen. And they put these lights on, and it just made that area look like it was daylight.

MH: How many lights do they need to do that?

KA: Excuse me?

MH: How many lights do they actually need to do that? Hundreds?

KA: That, I don't know. I don't know.

MH: But they just literally shine them onto the low clouds?

KA: Right, and it bounced off the clouds back down to the ground.

MH: And nighttime turns into daylight.

KA: That's right.

MH: So, then what happens? You light them up and surprise them?

KA: Then we went in, and I led the charge across the railroad there down in. Just before we got in, there was an area right in front—I've got some pictures of this somewhere, that's what I was looking for. But anyway, we were stopped by a white flag waving in the air. If you can imagine that, there's a railroad tie this high—a railroad track this high—and you go down a little bit off the banks of that and get into a low area, and then there's the back of buildings of the town of Geilenkirchen. And between the buildings and that railroad tie, there's probably, I'll say, a thousand feet or better. And there were trenches in there. This flag waved out of a house, out of the back of a store or something, and we stopped. And one of the guys in my platoon got up, and he was shot immediately. In other words, it was a trap.

MH: So much for white flags.

KA: That's right. So, the area was heavily mined, and we had to be careful of that, but we got in and took the town and went through to the other side. That's the first engagement.

MH: And you were a lieutenant at the time?

KA: Yeah, first lieutenant.

MH: Platoon leader?

KA: Platoon leader, right. (inaudible) Profit was our company commander. Al Profit; he was a captain.

MH: How old were you at the time?

KA: Let's see—

MH: Like, twenty-five years old?

KA: No. (to his wife) Ma, how old were we when we got married?

Mrs. Ayers: How old?

KA: Yeah.

Mrs. Ayers: I was twenty-one, and you were twenty-three.

KA: You're right. She was twenty-one and I was twenty-three, and that's about two years later.

MH: Two years later.

KA: Yeah.

MH: So, what's that experience like for a twenty-five-year-old? You're leading men in combat; you're seeing men be wounded and killed for the first time.

KA: What was it like?

MH: Yeah.

KA: Hmm. Don't overlook the word "scared," 'cause I was. But I don't know, it's something we'd been taught in basic training, and I'd been teaching it to people out at Camp Wheeler and stuff like that. So, it was expected, the results and all.

MH: The men you were leading in your platoon, were they from all over the United States?

KA: Yes, sir, and let me say this: The ones that caused the most trouble in civilian life sometimes turned out to be the majority of the best soldiers. In other words—I won't use this word literally, but a gangster on the streets of New York was a hell of a soldier in the field.

MH: Interesting. I assume you had guys who were told, "Join the Army or go to jail."

KA: No, at that particular time, I was not aware of that, but that did happen. I wasn't aware of it at that time; I was aware of it later on, though.

MH: At that point, what did you know about the Holocaust or about concentration camps? Anything?

KA: Nothing.

MH: Not a thing.

KA: Not a thing.

MH: Tell me about your first contact with them.

KA: Well, we went—and I don't remember the date we went to the town, but I can send you the maps and stuff like that that would trace it to it.

MH: That'd be great.

KA: When we went across the Elbe River—they flooded it, but we got across it, and that's where I got my first Purple Heart. But anyway, we went on down there and we got to Salzwedel. It was my company—or Profit's company, my platoon. I was the weapons platoon leader and executive officer. We got there, and I literally saw the guards on the gate there in Salzwedel shot and killed. I personally didn't fire a shot. I was behind, maybe, you know, fifty feet or a hundred yards or something, I don't know.

MH: According to the records I have, this is April 10.¹ April 10, 1945—

KA: That sounds right.

MH: —that the 84th got to Salzwedel.

KA: Yeah.

MH: So, you were riding—were you walking or riding?

KA: It seems like what we had done, we rode to the outside and got into a big farmhouse. The lines into Salzwedel were still open, and we talked to somebody and asked them to surrender or something, I don't remember.

MH: You mean to somebody in the town of Salzwedel?

KA: Yes, sir. I mean, that would be the Germans. But anyway, we stayed there for a while, and an interesting thing. In the town we went to, the first thing we inspected was the chimneys, and we pulled out some of the most beautiful smoked hams you'd ever see in your life out of that farmhouse and ate them. But anyway, then we went on from there and attacked into Salzwedel, where I saw them shot. All right, now—

MH: You were shot in Salzwedel?

KA: No, no, where I saw the guards shot.

¹ The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum lists April 14, 1945 as Salzwedel's liberation. On April 10, the 84th Infantry Division liberated Ahlem; both Ahlem and Salzwedel were sub-camps of Neuengamme.

MH: Was Salzwedel its own little town?

KA: Oh, yes, uh-huh.

MH: Where was the camp in relation to Salzwedel?

KA: I don't know. I do know this: When we got there—well, no, I'm ahead of myself. We went right on through at that particular time. We were there long enough to see the—and I'm pretty sure that it was at this time I heard there were 500 men in a prison there in Salzwedel, and there were 500 women in a prison there in Salzwedel—a different one—some of them husbands and wives who hadn't seen each other in five years, or a long time. They hit the streets, and the first thing I remember seeing is they were going in there. The town was surprised, and they were going in there and getting hundred-pound bags of sugar and splitting them open with a knife and coming out eating double handfuls of it. They were looting the stores. One of them brought me the most beautiful accordion you ever saw in your life. They were just looting and giving stuff away.

MH: Let's go back to where you first saw the guards shot at the gate. Where was your unit when you saw that happen?

KA: Attacking Salzwedel.

MH: Okay. What did these gates look like? I mean, was it—

KA: They were—best I can remember, I'd say they were like posts, 8x8 [foot] posts, wired about, maybe, ten feet tall and large enough to open up where a vehicle could go inside of it.

MH: And it was a barbed-wire fence around the gate?

KA: Yes, there was.

MH: Were there towers that the guards were in, or were they not in towers?

KA: No, they were on the ground.

MH: On the ground.

KA: The ones that I saw shot were; the guards had rushed to the ground.

MH: So, this had to be—I mean, this couldn't have been in the middle of the town where all the civilians were living. This had to be slightly outside of the town.

KA: No, it—well, let's put it this way. I can't remember. The gates of the town were real close together. I don't know just how far, but it seemed like the town, the village, surrounded the gates.

MH: So, you had no idea you were going to come across this kind of camp.

KA: No way.

MH: Then there's been this battle inside the town of Salzwedel.

KA: What now?

MH: There was a battle to capture Salzwedel, the town.

KA: Oh, yeah, initially, but by the time we got to where those gates were, most all the Germans had either backed out of there or gone, and the only thing left in there were the guards on the gate that people—other guards rushing to them, as I remember.

MH: You saw your men open fire?

KA: Oh, yes, sir.

MH: I mean, pitched battle, lots of shooting, or just sniper shots?

KA: Sniper shots, I think. It wasn't regular fire, no.

MH: So, the guards fall, and then what happens?

KA: Oh!

MH: Do you see the inmates, the prisoners, come out?

KA: No, no. We went right on through, and went down—the unit stopped in, and I'm with the unit now. We went down to where we met the Russians at that—what was that river?

MH: The Elbe? Was it the Elbe River?

KA: I don't think it was the Elbe, no. The Elbe was back.

MH: I'll figure it out.

KA: If you'll just bear with me, I've been so doggone busy. I'm a major fundraiser for the Shrine, and I was sent down here by direction of the president to help out, back when I was still in service, because of my rank as a major and I was doing a full colonel's job. I was liaison for four governors from a military standpoint.

MH: Really?

KA: So, therefore, I got to know a lot of important people and whatnot, and because of that, I got into the Shrine later on. They made me the leading man. I know the right people to get money.

MH: Right, which is why you're working so hard for the Shrine.

KA: Right. Well, but let me go on and tell you another little story. We went on to the Elbe—I guess it was the Elbe. That's where we met the Russians, and we had orders not to take any walking wounded across the river, to hold them back. Now, I told you—

MH: Walking wounded who? Americans? Germans?

KA: No, no, this is the foreigners who're trying to get away from the Russians.

MH: Oh, okay.

KA: They didn't want to do that. Well, I was there, and the general—the colonel that I had first went with the 84th with out of Camp Claiborne, Louisiana, he and I became real good friends. He was a West Point graduate of thirty-nine [1939], and we had gone into New York together a couple times. But anyway, he had been wounded in one of our first battles around Geilenkirchen—no, it was during the Battle of the Bulge. He got wounded, and he came back and was reassigned to the 334th Regiment, which was the third—the 333rd, 334th, and 335th were the three regiments that were together during the war. And he called my regimental commander and wanted me especially to come back, because they were occupying Salzwedel. He wanted me as his special service officer, because we were stymied on the river and couldn't go anywhere. So, I was released to go back with him, and this was where I found out all the information. This was about a week or ten days later. The 334th had the mission to occupy Salzwedel.

MH: Okay, so—

KA: So, that's when I learned there were 500 soldiers—men—and 500 women, two separate camps there that we—and, you know, I got to thinking about it. Those guards that we killed might not have been guards on the camp; they might've been just guards in the area, although there was wire and stuff like that. I just don't know.

MH: The inmates of the camp, could you tell what country they were from?

KA: Yes, this is interesting. There were nine American soldiers there when I got there, got back there, and I got them released to come home immediately, of course. The other units consisted of all occupied countries—Yugoslavia, Hungary, France, England—and we let them get back, too. But all the countries that had been captured; and the people had been forced to work.

MH: So, this was a slave labor camp.

KA: Right, at Salzwedel. A slave labor camp is what it was.

MH: When you got back there to help out, what did you see? What did the camp look like?

KA: I actually did not get into the camp itself. I had my office set up in Salzwedel, and this is when I seen all the looting going on and all—in addition to what I saw as we passed through there. But they furnished me with cartons upon cases of cartons of cigarettes, which I was responsible for passing out to these people, and food. They set up and they brought in K rations and all those—tinned rations and whatnot—for them. And I knew I had to do something to get them organized.

So, what I did—and it turned out very successful—I organized Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday into shows in a big theater there, and I let each country put on a show for the entire group for that particular day. It turned out very successful. We had—I can't remember the name, but we had a famous French male singer who sang the French national anthem for the first time in five years on that Monday night.

MH: He had been an inmate at the camp?

KA: Yes, sir. He was an inmate, captured there.

MH: That had to be one hell of a moment.

KA: It was. Now—and I still sort of cringe when I see it. There's a lady who was—I don't know if she's alive today—a very, very famous lady who was a singer and made one song real, real famous. She was there, and she sang that song that night and put on a show. I wish I could think of her name, or the man's name. You'd recognize them. I've got the records somewhere.

MH: What kind of physical condition were these people in? Had they been starved?

KA: Yeah, they worked at night and stayed in the barracks in daytime.

MH: What were they working at?

KA: I have no idea.

MH: Were they feeding them or were they just starving them to death?

KA: Evidently, they lived there for five years; they must've been getting a little food. But they didn't have the things that they were used to having.

MH: Were they wearing those striped uniforms or in different clothes?

KA: No, they were in—what'd we call those people back in those days?

MH: DPs [displaced persons]?

KA: Yeah, displaced persons, right. They were wearing displaced persons clothes. They were not in any type of uniform.

MH: But, I mean, the Germans didn't put them in uniforms.

KA: The Germans—actually, no. We did not really see any German soldiers, per se, that were fighting against us. Even the guards did not have uniforms on.

MH: This was not one of those camps where there were stacks of bodies when you arrived.

Hello? I'll try and call him back.

Pause in recording

KA: Hello?

MH: Hi, we got cut off.

KA: Yeah, sure did.

MH: I was saying, this wasn't the kind of camp where there were stacks of bodies there when you arrived?

KA: Didn't see any. Not at Salzwedel. I don't believe they were killing anybody. They were working them, and if they died, I don't know what happened.

MH: Did you have much contact with the inmates there?

KA: Only to pick out the people who volunteered to lead up the entertainment for their night, and I don't remember their names. But they were well-qualified people from private life—civilian life—to do what they did.

MH: How long did you stay there?

KA: About, oh, two weeks.

MH: So, where were you on V-E Day?

KA: I was back on the—I guess it was the Elbe River.

MH: The Elbe River? Okay. How does seeing something like that—I mean, I know how war affects people, but how does seeing camps like that affect you?

KA: I just don't remember, but it was very pitiful, though. I mean, you felt real sorry for them. You don't know what they did or whatnot to be in that position.

MH: How did it affect your attitude toward the Germans?

KA: Shoot 'em on a minute. Couldn't bear to think about them.

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

KA: They did what?

MH: After they saw the camps, they didn't take any prisoners.

KA: Well, I can relate another situation, which would not pertain to that, but that is absolutely 100 percent correct. We found a bunch of Germans who had American shoes on one time. They had just slaughtered us. I lost forty-three men on a hill, and none of them lived.

MH: This is going to sound like a naïve question, but I'm going to ask it anyway. Does anybody ever say, "Well, the Geneva Convention says you shouldn't do that"?

KA: No.

MH: That's what I thought. Okay. I spent a year in Vietnam, so I can relate to what you're saying, but it's just there's people who say you're not supposed to do that sort of thing, and you go, "Yeah, right."

KA: You know, I started to tell you another little story, and I don't think you—I got the idea you weren't interested. While I was up on Elbe River after this was over with—I told you we had orders not to take any prisoners at all, but a high-ranking German officer came with his field wife across the Elbe. He had a pouch full of diamonds and gold and coins and stuff like that, and he offered it to one of my soldiers—there were actually two of them—that met him.

They brought him back to me, and I said, "No way, take him on back to the next battalion," and they did. But what happened was they turned him around and sent him back. Now, I've got the names of those two people. In fact, I see them every year—they're still alive—at my reunions. The sixty-third reunion was last year in Branson, and I saw them up there then, and we talked about that. I told them you had called me. But

that was one of the things that they were offered, just to get he and his wife back across the Elbe, back into safe territory.

MH: To get away from the Russians.

KA: And then there's another—it's sort of vague, but back during the occupation, I came home as a high-point officer and then was sent to White Sands Proving Ground—no, I became a high-point officer and went back to Fort Benning, and then was sent back overseas for the occupation. And before my wife came over on the first ship with my daughter, I was warden of the Landsberg Army Prison, close to Fussen, Germany. And also, it was a prison camp down there, and I can't remember the name of it. I got the records somewhere.

Me and eight American soldiers was to escort this train of displaced persons back to Russia. We hit a border. We took on five guards and an officer from there, but we stayed with the train all the way over, and the next border the same way and brought it back. My orders were not to let anybody take any cars off of that train, and I guarantee you that they tried every trick in the world. The hot box here, this wouldn't work. And I said, "No way." I brought the train back, but they tried in every country to get it. Now, before we left, I actually saw a man stick his head through a glass window, turn it, and cut it off. He did not want to go back to Russia. There were a lot of people who did not want to go back, but we had to watch them real close. But this guy—I was surprised; it was the first one, and that's how serious it was for him to return. What he'd done, I don't know.

MH: How many times were you wounded over there?

KA: Excuse me?

MH: You were wounded?

KA: Wounded, yeah, just twice.

MH: Shrapnel, bullets?

KA: Shrapnel.

MH: Yeah? What about decorations?

KA: Oh, a Bronze Star.

MH: Okay. I mean, this war was sixty-three years ago, and you still remember moments in that war like it was yesterday.

KA: That's right.

MH: Why do you think that is?

KA: Excuse me?

MH: Why do you think that is? Why is it that guys who've been in the war remember it so well?

KA: Oh, well, this may be one reason, and you probably know this: If you go to a public place and you see a couple of people in uniform, out of uniform or whatnot, and they're talking about what they did during the war, you can as well as be assured that they did nothing. If you shot somebody, you don't tell anybody about it. If you—the only time that we ever talk about what we did in my unit is at our reunions when somebody says, "Ken, why did we do this?" A real soldier never talks about it, and those that do didn't see nothing. So, therefore, I think we keep it to ourselves; we don't talk about it. I don't even talk to my children about it. And maybe that's why I remember things. I haven't told anybody and forgotten it. Does that sound reasonable?

MH: Yes, it does. You said your wife—because you were—how long did you stay in the military?

KA: Twenty-four years.

MH: Twenty-four years. And you came out a major.

KA: Yes.

MH: When your wife came over to stay with you when you were assigned there for the occupation, did you tell her about the kinds of things you had seen, the camps?

KA: No. She's sitting in the chair over there, and she's finding out things right now that she's never heard before.

MH: You didn't want her to know? She didn't want to ask?

KA: That, I don't know. I just didn't want to talk about it. I mean, who wants to tell somebody that wasn't there that I killed that person or I killed that woman or that child? I know we took a town one time that had a hedge around it. I was taking some people out to guard the perimeter and we heard a rifle click, and my platoon sergeant turned right around with a machine gun and went right down the line, I mean, started firing. Well, unfortunately, we killed some people that we shouldn't have, but they shouldn't have been there, either—children and women. There were soldiers there, too. But when they clicked that rifle, like it was fixed to fire, that was just a sign to open up.

MH: I understand.

KA: You didn't give it a second thought.

MH: Okay. Anything else you can recall about the concentration camp or the slave labor camps there?

KA: The only thing—if I could get some more material, I'd like to tell you about that—I've got it somewhere. I would like to give you some more information on the trip back to Russia that I took all those displaced persons that didn't want to go. But I just don't have the facts in my memory.

MH: Do you have a picture of yourself from back then?

KA: Say again?

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

KA: Oh, yeah, lots of them.

MH: Is it possible—if I send you an envelope, could you send me a picture from back then, and a current picture? I'll scan them and I'll mail them right back to you.

KA: That's all right, I've got enough pictures that I can send you, several that I'll write on the back of them, and you can use what you want to. They're of no interest—I mean, I've got enough of them left for the family.

MH: Okay, well, if you could pick out a couple—you know, a good one from the Army days, and a current one.

KA: You want action-type pictures or do you want—?

MH: Something that shows you.

KA: Something that shows me. Okay. Now, let me ask you another question.

MH: Sure.

KA: How much—I'm just about ready to wind up. We just had the second Florida Capital City Barbecue Cookoff, a national thing, and we raised a whole bunch of money. This didn't go to the hospital in Tampa, it goes to maintenance on our building; it's not tax-deductible. I raised over \$5,000 for it, and I've got a lot of thank-yous to send out, and that's why I've been so tied up. Now, how much time have I got?

MH: You got plenty of time. No rush. I still have—I'm just finishing up the research phase, and I have six months to finish writing the book. So, you've got time.

KA: In two or three more weeks, I'll have plenty of time to go through some footlockers, and I might be able to even send you some orders or something like that that you could look at. And if I marked them "Return these"—because I'm going to give a lot to the Capital City history thing that I got, because there's some real fine documents in there.

MH: If you have anything related to the camp at Salzwedel, that'd be good.

KA: Yeah, I've got pictures of people coming out.

MH: That'd be great, if you have picture of people coming out of the camp.

KA: We even had some of those people actually coming—I'm surprised at how far—do you know who our executive president is of the 84th Infantry?

MH: No, I don't.

KA: Forrest Lothrop.

MH: Oh, I think I've spoken with him.

KA: Yeah. He's the one that gave me that copy of what you—

MH: Right.

KA: And, see, he was in my company during the war.

MH: Oh, okay.

KA: In fact, most everybody that's been in headquarters at all (inaudible) was in A Company. There's been three or four presidents, and I've been president of the association and all that. We sort of carry it on. Thank you so much. I'm sorry I've—

MH: Okay, what I'll do is I'll put a Priority Mail envelope in the mail to you with my address on it and postage on it, and if you can find those photos and then stick them in there and just send them to me, that'll be good.

KA: I will have time real shortly.

MH: Okay. Thank you very, very much. I appreciate your time.

KA: Thank you for your patience.

MH: No problem. Thank you very, very much, Kenneth. Bye-bye.

End of interview