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Robert Burrows oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, August 21, 2008

Robert Burrows (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. This interview begins in mid-sentence.]

Robert Burrows: —the prophecy has been fulfilled, right now, except for the restoration of the temple. And that's coming. It's gonna be interesting. We're in interesting times.

Michael Hirsh: Yes, that's the curse.

RB: Here we go again, Mike.

MH: It's okay. Your name is Robert Burrows, B-u-r-r-o-w-s.

RB: Right.

MH: What's your address?

RB: ...

MH: And your phone number?

RB: ...

MH: And your date of birth?

RB: 10-1-24 [October 1, 1924].

MH: Do you have an e-mail address?

RB: Yes....

MH: Where were you before you went in the Army?

RB: I was born and raised in the Detroit, Michigan area. Royal Oak.

MH: And what were you doing before you went in the service?

RB: I was working for a supermarket chain, early supermarket—Wrigley Supermarkets in Detroit—as a produce clerk.

MH: So, you enlisted, or were you drafted?

RB: I went down to enlist right after my eighteenth birthday, and I flunked the test for air cadet. I only had a tenth grade education, so I paid for it right then and there. Missed it by one point.

MH: So, then what happens?

RB: I went down the hall, tried to list in the Marines. Sign on the door: “Not taking any enlistments.” Can you believe that?

MH: When is this?

RB: October of 1942. Not taking enlistments—the sign right on the door.

MH: Out to lunch, or—?

RB: No, no. “Not taking enlistments,” right on the stinking door. The door was locked. I couldn’t believe it. So Ted and Chuck, a couple of buddies that I went down with, they passed the exam, and they were told to hang on and they would be called. When they got their notice, then I left the day before they did. I just went ahead and volunteered at that time.

MH: At the Army.

RB: I would have been due anyway, but I just—

MH: So, how old were you on the day you went in?

RB: Eighteen.

MH: Eighteen. And where’d you go?

RB: I went to Fort Custer, Battle Creek, Michigan, and from there to Kearns, Utah, which is an Army Air Corps basic training center. And then from there, they put me in the medics. So, I was sent to Palm Beach, Florida.

MH: Not bad duty.

RB: Terrible. Breakers Hotel. (laughs)

MH: I’m feeling bad for you already.

RB: Yeah, right. And I spent April until the twentieth of February 1944 at the Breakers Hotel. It was terrible. Golf course, you know. We were—really, it wasn’t that good for the

kids that were coming back from North Africa, Air Corps kids, shot up, you know, and burned and what have you. But anyway—

MH: So, you were working as a medic there.

RB: I was working as a clerk.

MH: As a clerk.

RB: Yes. I worked in the lab as a clerk. I got sent to a couple autopsies; that was kind of miserable. I didn't want to do that, but I did. You know, as an eighteen year-old, you try anything.

MH: So when did you decide you weren't having enough fun and you wanted to go to Europe?

RB: Well, I tried to get out of there a couple times, and they wouldn't let me go. I volunteered for the paratroopers, and even got so far as to take a blood test one time, and they turned me down. Then in January of forty-four [1944], the Judge Advocate came down, and I don't know why they came down. I don't recall. But there was a line-up of a bunch of us guys in the hallway, complaining. I wanted to get out of there. And that's the reason I went to get in the line-up: I wanted to get out.

Well, they knew long before I did that they were going to need bodies in Europe, so on the twentieth of February of forty-four [1944], I was on my way. They sent me to Camp Sheridan—or Camp Reynolds, at Sheridan, Ohio. And I was there for a few days and then to [Camp] Kilmer, and then shipped on overseas. And that was about the twenty—I think my DV214 shows I left on the twenty-fifth, but I don't think I left on the twenty-fifth but that's the date that they got rid of me.

MH: So, you get to Europe in?

RB: In early March of 1944. And I was, again, put in military government, civil affairs. And then I was assigned to the 12th Corps. I tried to get out of there a couple times, and that didn't work. In December of forty-four [1944], the Germans—you know, at the Battle of the Bulge, the sixteenth of December, and the next day they were crying for help. When I say they were crying for help, that was the word that went out. Clerks, band

members and everybody would be taken by the existing infantry units that were in that area.

So, I went in and volunteered, and I was sent into General Manton S. Eddy's office. He wanted to know why; you know, he probably thought I was stupid, 'cause he was a former division commander of the 9th Infantry Division, and he knew the score. He sat down and talked to me for about ten minutes, and then he gave me the opportunity of serving in any infantry division unit in Europe, including Italy. And I said, "It don't make any difference, as long as I can go." So, he says, "You go down here to the 2nd Battalion, 317th Infantry. My former aide de camp was commanding the 2nd Battalion."

So, orders were cut, and I left. And I was unusual. Colonel—Lieutenant Colonel George Ball picked me up at Metz, the repo depot. And I don't know whether you recall Ball fruit jar as a kid?

MH: I'm familiar with it, yes.

RB: It's that family. I didn't find that out until much later. But anyway, he picked me up special delivery and dropped me off at Regimental Headquarters on the morning of the twenty-fourth of December.

MH: How close is this to the fighting?

RB: Oh, it was just a few miles away, probably about five or six miles away. Anyway, I went into Regimental Headquarters and reported in, and they wouldn't even let me stay inside. It [his reception] was colder than *Hogan's Goat*, you know? Clear, but it was cold. They ran me outside. "Somebody will get in contact; your unit is cut off. So, whenever they get back, we'll get you to that area." About ten minutes later, we got an artillery barrage. I dove under a grain drill. They hit the house—set it on fire—that Regimental Headquarters was in. I went back inside to see if I could help, you know, and they ran me out again. (laughs)

MH: Did you not bathe?¹

¹ This is a reference to William Alfred's play *Hogan's Goat*. One character, an Irish immigrant, tells the story of crossing to America in steerage, after which he was thus very dirty. The immigration officer turned him away, saying, "In America, we bathe."

RB: (laughs) I thought it was rather strange, you know. But anyway, this was Christmas Eve. And I don't recall how but I got up to Niederfeulen, Luxembourg, picked myself out a house to start a fire and get warm. And next morning, I reported in to the battalion. They broke through during the night. And then on, it was the—I was joined with the 2nd Battalion.

MH: 2nd Battalion—

RB: They assigned me to the S-2 section. Can you believe that, the intelligence section? (laughs)

MH: After you volunteered to leave the Breakers in Palm Beach, Florida? Sure.

RB: Not much. (laughs)

MH: It's the Army. I believe it.

RB: Yeah. But anyway, I was assigned to that section. I knew nothing, you know. I had Air Corps basic training; it was just nothing more than personal survival. You watched the kids around you and you learned in a hurry.

MH: I'm surprised you had a rifle.

RB: Oh, I had two or three of them. Matter of fact, I had even picked up a .45. I traded a P38 that I had acquired somewhere along the line—well, at Corps Headquarters—and I traded that with a tanker for a .45. And I've still got that .45 today. It's at home.

MH: So, now you're with this infantry regiment, and then what?

RB: Well, the first few days we were in reserve. I think about the twenty-seventh or twenty-eighth, we moved out into the field. And then we were into the field from then until about the thirtieth or thirty-first of January. It was miserable. But during that time, we had an incident. I was with the command group—and again, here we go again. Intelligence? They weren't very intelligent.

Anyway, I was up with Colonel Boyston, the 313th Field Artillery forward observer—Lieutenant Clark. That's the name that I remember, and I still haven't got that clarified; any records that I can find, I can't clarify that. But that's the name that's stuck in my thick skull. And we had a radio operator: the colonel had a radio operator, so did Lieutenant Clark, and Ernie Fuller and I—I don't know why I don't recall any of the other men. I knew Ernie. And this is from the twenty-fifth of December until the twenty-first of January. You don't get acquainted with too many people, but I knew Ernie by name. Why we were together, I can't even tell you that.

But Easy and Fox Company went out into a spread attack. We were going to take the town of Bourscheid.

MH: The what?

RB: Town of Bourscheid, Luxembourg.

MH: Okay.

RB: And even before we hit the river, they had spotted us. Right after daylight, and they just literally decimated the battalion. And the last round of the morning landed right in the middle of the six of us, and all of those fellas were killed. Ernie, I think, protected me. I think it was concussion that killed him, but it was the shrapnel that got the rest of them.

MH: And you weren't hit?

RB: I wasn't touched. I thought I was hit right back here, something hit me; it was dirt, more than likely. But I survived that.

MH: Was it artillery, mortars, rockets?

RB: That was the last stinkin' artillery round of the morning. From then, it was quiet, absolutely dead silence.

MH: How'd you cope with that?

RB: Pardon?

MH: How did you cope with that?

RB: It was tough. But it was even worse a day or two later. They sent me back with Graves Registration to pick up the colonel's body, plus the rest of 'em. I stayed there, stood around all day while they scoured the battlefield for the bodies: about seventeen of 'em. So that was kind of tough. And of course, then after that, you wipe it out. You really don't wipe it out, but you did at that particular time, and so, we went on. We had other skirmishes. Luckily, I didn't accompany the rifle companies on the Rhine crossing. That was a direct assault with Easy and George Companies. And we lost about twenty kids that night, too. I wasn't with any of them.

MH: Let me ask you: at this point, do you know anything about the Holocaust? Did they tell you anything?

RB: No, no. I knew nothing about the Holocaust.

MH: About concentration camps, slave labor camps?

RB: No, we didn't know. Nothing about that. I don't recall anything being said about that at all. The only thing that I can go back on that I remember, and I must have been about sixteen, was when the Jews—1,000 Jews were turned back at Miami.

MH: The [MS] *St. Louis*.

RB: That was the ship, yeah. But I vaguely remember that. And, you know, it didn't make any sense to me at the time. It didn't sink in. I'm sure it did to my dad and mother. They were probably aware of that. Anyway, none of this sank in, the Army told us nothing, and when we really found out about it was Ohrdruf, I think, was the first one.

MH: How did you find out about Ohrdruf?

RB: Well, it was just rumor. You know, that they found bodies. That was it.

MH: That would have been April 3.

RB: Pardon?

MH: That was April 3.

RB: Yeah, right, and that was before us. But that was a rumor thing, and again, you wipe it out, because it was your survival. That's what you're concerned about right then and there.

MH: What kind of rumor spreads, though? What do you hear?

RB: Well, you just—I just heard something to the effect that they found a camp with a lot of bodies. Prisoners of war is really what it was; they weren't talking about Holocaust of Jews or Poles or Ukrainians or Russians or anything else. But—

MH: Were those rumors spread person to person, or over the radio net or—

RB: Person-to-person. We had no radios. We had no contact with radio at all; it was just person-to-person. Somebody said something, you heard it, and that's the way it went. And we really wiped these things out of our minds, anyway. You couldn't go on and be concerned about what's happened. You had a job to do, and I think that basically that's what we did. We just wiped it off of our mind. And we had a battle at Erfurt. I think that was our last battle where we lost a few people in my battalion.

MH: That's Erfurt [Germany].

RB: Yes. And that's what, about ten, twelve miles from Weimar? I think that was the eleventh, either the—no, it was the tenth.

MH: Of April.

RB: Tenth of April forty-four [1944]. Lieutenant McAlpine was killed; my boss was killed that day. On the tenth, yeah. And the eleventh, we moved north of town, a small town, and I think we spent most of the day there and that night, and the next morning we

started for Weimar. But there was rumors again, rumors by mouth and I don't know who started it; maybe it come from the Battalion C. But there was a four-hour delay before we attacked, if we attacked, because we give 'em an opportunity to surrender. So, I think I left about noon, and I had a Jeep and a driver. And I don't know why I would have a Jeep and a—but I—

MH: What was your rank at this point?

RB: I was a staff sergeant. And I don't—you know when I found out that I was promoted? About two weeks ago. I found a morning report where I was promoted the sixth of March. (laughs)

MH: So, you never put the stripes on.

RB: No, I didn't know it until after that. They told me, you know, but they didn't tell me the date. If they did tell me the date, it never sunk in. And I didn't remember. I thought maybe it was some time in that period, but I had no idea until just a couple weeks ago. Anyway, I was—I had a driver, and I think it was Ben Burnside, and we were moving along. We knew that the 6th Armored Division was somewhere in the vicinity, but I hadn't run into anybody. I was on a back road at that time, but it seemed like it was a fairly—you know, a fairly good-sized road for that area.

MH: And you're in a Jeep?

RB: Yeah, I was in a Jeep. On the way, I picked up a German as a POW, as a prisoner, had him in the back end of the Jeep. And I ran into a couple Russians that had been—we had picked them up probably two or three days or a week before, and they were in our uniforms: no insignia or anything but they just had pants and shirt and jacket and boots. And they wanted me—they wanted to know if they could take the prisoner off my hands. I said, "Sure. Man alive, I don't want to be bothered with him anyway." Well, they took him, and they annihilated him, they killed him. I found that out later on, when I got back. They were after revenge, is what it was. But anyway, it was just after this time that I ran upon this camp.

MH: So, you're by yourself?

RB: I'm by myself, with a driver, just scouting out ahead of the battalion. And I spotted this camp. I had Ben—I think it was Ben—drive up there and—

MH: This is about what time of day?

RB: This was about three o'clock in the afternoon.

MH: And what kind of day is it?

RB: Oh, it's kind of hazy, overcast—light overcast.

MH: Okay, and this is April—?

RB: This is April 11.

MH: Eleventh, okay. So, you're driving down this road, and what is it, farmland?

RB: Yes.

MH: Hilly?

RB: Rolling, slight rolling, not heavy. Slight rolling.

MH: And what do you see?

RB: Well, off to the right was a grassy meadow type thing, you know, and off to the left here, here up on the rise was a camp. And you could see it.

MH: Barbed wire fence?

RB: Fenced, yup, barbed wire fence, and you could see the buildings here and the fence over here, and the gate was right next to the building. It was not like Buchenwald, after I found out later, a little bit different, but the administration building was off here. This gate was here, and these fellows were standing here, to the left. (draws map)

MH: Fellows.

RB: Two POWs in their uniforms.

MH: The striped uniforms?

RB: Striped uniforms.

MH: Okay. And what do they do?

RB: Just standing there watching me. They didn't move.

MH: Holding on the wire?

RB: Just had their hands on the wire like they were resting, just like this, both of 'em. And I thought it was strange, but I didn't want to be bothered, to be honest with you. I had things on my mind. I was supposed to be out scouting ahead of the battalion, and if I run into anything to let 'em know.

MH: Right. You have no radio.

RB: I did have a radio.

MH: At that point, you have a radio.

RB: Yes, we had a radio in the Jeep. But I went up to the front of this office building; it had a walk-in door here. I didn't go to the gate. I went to the walk-in door, and I told Ben, "Hang on, I'm gonna see what's in here." So, I went up to the door, and it opened. Nobody inside, nothing. I went through the office to the back end, looked out the back end. I didn't see anybody. I didn't go out, I didn't investigate. I couldn't have done anything anyway, by myself. So, I walked back out and told Ben, "I don't see anything there. Let's go." And so I did.

MH: And the only two prisoners you saw were—

RB: The only two I saw.

MH: You didn't see anybody else?

RB: Nobody else. I thought it was strange, you know, but that's the way it was. There were a lot of strange things that happened.

MH: Did you see barracks buildings?

RB: Yes. There were some barracks buildings in behind. I'm sorry.

MH: What did they look like?

RB: Well, they looked like the single-story—what you call typical barracks buildings that you saw—

MH: But not A-frames that went into the ground, 'cause there were some camps that had those.

RB: No, I didn't see that. They were low. Not the two-story job that you may have been referring to. These look like they would have been built, just a floor, step up into the building and that was it. It was cover, really, what it amounted to.

MH: Was the gate open?

RB: The gate was closed. The gate was closed.

MH: Locked?

RB: I don't know. I didn't check the lock.

MH: And you said it said “*Arbeit macht frei*” over it?

RB: It said “*Arbeit macht frei*,” yup. And this was on the left side of the administration building. Not as big as Buchenwald, the one that I went into fifty years later, but a smaller rendition.

MH: So, somehow, the prisoners were gone.

RB: They had taken off.

MH: The SS were gone.

RB: They had taken off. Apparently, they were creating havoc in Weimar. And they must have heard about what was going on; the guards took off earlier because they know they were threatened. So as soon as the guards took off, I’m sure they took off too, went into Weimar. And they were doing a lot of looting.

MH: Former prisoners.

RB: Yes. I don’t blame ’em, you know. They were trying to survive, for Pete’s sake.

MH: The ones that could still walk.

RB: Yes, absolutely. Right. So, most of ’em must have been able to walk.

MH: So, do you report this in by radio?

RB: I didn’t report anything, because there was nothing that was threatening. You know, nothing to report, really. I was out, really, on a contact patrol, and I saw nothing, so I went on into Weimar. And in Weimar, in the center of town, the 6th Armored Division—a lot of their units, you know, tanks, trucks, Jeeps, and what have you—were milling around; and I think the 319th had moved in from the north. That’s the 319th Regiment had moved in from the north, and I think that’s where they ran into the camp, where the 317th

didn't. Weimar is here, Buchenwald was up in here. I came in south of it, and I must have bypassed it, didn't even know it, and went on into town. They were MPs [military police]—not the MPs, but the rifle companies were beginning to police the city. And one of the first things that we did was the police station, to make sure that people were turning in their weapons and cameras. You know, what are they going to threaten us with, those things, you know? But that was one of the things that we did.

MH: Did you see any of the looting going on?

RB: I didn't see any looting at all. Apparently, the area I was in was pretty quiet.

MH: And had they found Buchenwald by that time?

RB: Somebody had found Buchenwald by that time.

MH: And the word was out?

RB: And the word was out. And I thought that I was the one that had seen Buchenwald, you know, and I didn't see anything exciting. (laughs) So therefore, in my mind, it wasn't really a big deal. And that's really the extent of what happened on that. But let me go a step further and go after the war. We went on into Austria and we were there for about a month, and then we came back into Germany. And we were in southern Germany into Füssen, Pfronten—the Olympics, thirty-six [1936] Olympics—

MH: Munich?

RB: No, no, doggone it; the Winter Olympics in thirty-six [1936].² What a dumb jackass. I can't even think of the name. But anyway, we were down there, and that's just north of the Austrian border. And one day, here come some trucks down the road, kickin' dust: charcoal wood-operated, you know. Canvas-covered, and the back end of 'em were loaded. And I found out that they were Jewish refugees. And you know where they were headed for? They were headed for Italy. Didn't ring a bell, you know, until 1951 when Leon Uris wrote *Exodus*. That was part of it, right there.

MH: They were going to get on the boat.

² Burrows is referring to Garmisch-Partenkirchen, which hosted the 1936 Winter Olympics. That year's Summer Games were also held in Germany, in Berlin.

RB: Yup. They were trying to get home. Quite interesting.

MH: So, how did seeing the things you saw in the war affect your life?

RB: I guess I get pretty bitter about some of the stupidity that goes on, the gutless people we have in leadership. If we'd have had gutsy people, we wouldn't have had the Holocaust. We'd have had people do something about it. If we had leaders like George Patton, we'd have ended the war much sooner. Many, many people's lives would have been saved in Europe.

MH: How does it affect you personally?

RB: Well, I guess it still affects me. You know, you have those thoughts. They go back.

MH: You're replaying things in your head.

RB: Oh, yeah, all the time. Constantly. It affects you in your thinking politically, too. Believe me, it does; in mine, anyway. Maybe some of the others it doesn't, but I guess maybe I'm a kook. I think that we're nutty as fruitcakes. We don't read our Bible, we don't pay any attention to God, we've thrown him out of our country, we've thrown him out of our courts, schools. Pretty soon they're gonna be chipping it off of the buildings in Washington, D.C., any reference.

MH: Well, since you're a religious man—this is a question I've asked a lot of people, religious or not. If there's a God, how could God let the Holocaust happen?

RB: Because he allows Man a free will to do.

MH: But isn't there a point at which he should step in and say, "You got free will, but that's a little much"?

RB: No, then he's not God. He's not permitting Man to do his stupidity and bring the punishment upon himself, which he deserves. It's all through history the same way, in my book.

MH: See, I don't understand how people like Elie Wiesel can come out of Buchenwald and still believe in God.

RB: I do.

MH: I don't understand that. Explain it to me.

RB: Well, let me put it this way. Can you explain how we were created?

MH: No.

RB: Okay. Can you tell me whether you believe that there's a creation or you think we evolved?

MH: I'd go with evolution, but—

RB: Yeah, no. A lot of people do. But how can you possibly go with evolution, when nothing is evolving? We're not evolving; we've been this way for 6,000 years.³

MH: But 6,000 years is—

RB: Here we go again.

MH: Six thousand years is a blip.

RB: In God's life.

MH: In terms of the life of the Earth.

³ This is a reference to Archbishop James Ussher's 17th century chronology, in which he claimed that the world was created on the night preceding October 23, 4004 B.C.E.

RB: Well, we don't know that.

MH: We do know that.

RB: No, we don't. We're speculating. Who are we to determine that the Earth was created billions and billions and billions of years ago? That's what we do. We set a time limit right here, and that's what we've done. That's Man.

MH: We're never going to agree on this. Let me go back to one other thing. Under trying circumstances, people resort to prayer.

RB: Absolutely.

MH: And they pray, and they pray to survive a disastrous event, they pray for their family to survive. They ask God. It's like there's no atheists in foxholes; you pray that I'm not hit.

RB: Yes, that happens. You bet your bottom dollar.

MH: So now, picture people in the concentration camps, praying.

RB: Yes.

MH: And God doesn't answer. Or he says no.

RB: Okay, here's our problem with you people now. You don't recognize Jesus as God.

MH: Okay.

RB: Okay, here we go again. (laughs) And it goes back again that Jesus is the Messiah.

MH: But Jesus didn't save them in Buchenwald, either.

RB: Oh, no, he didn't intend to save them in Buchenwald.

MH: That's the part I don't understand. If he's a good and benevolent god, how does he let that happen? How does he just ignore those prayers? From Jews, from Christians, from Muslims, from anybody else's prayers.

RB: (blows nose) I don't understand a lot of these things myself, but I trust in God, completely. You know? And when I trust in God, I recognize that Jesus is God. And he died for me.

MH: What can we say? He was one of my people.

RB: Absolutely. And you should recognize him as such—

MH: As one of my people, I do. What did you do for the rest of your life?

RB: In sales for a number of years. I was on the road and got sick of that, so I went and stayed home and went into construction. And that's what I did until about ten years ago.

MH: Married?

RB: Yes, six children.

MH: Grandchildren?

RB: Many.

MH: All right. Thank you very much.

RB: And I thank you, Michael.

End of interview