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Elmer Chalcraft oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, September 5, 2008

Elmer Chalcraft (Interviewee)

Michael Hirsh (Interviewer)

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Concentration Camp Liberators Oral History Project
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Interviewer: Michael Hirsh (MH)
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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 on tape, your name is Elmer Chalcraft C-h-a-l-c-r-a-f-t? ... Ellery, Illinois... You were with the 63rd Infantry Division?

Elmer Chalcraft: Yup.

MH: Which regiment?

EC: 253rd.

MH: And what's your date of birth?

EC: Third [month] the 30th in twenty-five [March 30, 1925].

MH: Give me that one more time.

EC: Third the 30th in twenty-five [March 30, 1925].

MH: Okay. Can you tell me, when did you go in the Army?

EC: October forty-four [1944].

MH: And you were assigned where?

EC: To ROTC [Reserve Officer's Training Corps] then I went right overseas and into the 63rd Division.

MH: Where did you join the 63rd?

EC: In France, but I can't tell you what the name of the little place was.

MH: And you were a rifleman?

EC: No, I was a heavy weapons company. .30 caliber machine guns; water-cooled.

MH: Water-cooled machine guns?

EC: Yes.

MH: Tell me, at that time, did you know anything about the concentration camps?

EC: No, no, not until we got there, really. We just come up the Danube River and went down the road a little piece and right there it was.

MH: Which camp was it?

EC: It was the one at Günzburg, right outside of Günzburg.

MH: Günzburg?

EC: It was Dachau, if I remember right.

MH: It was one of the Dachau camps. Tell me, what did you see? What did you—what was going on?

EC: Well, when we got into town and stayed overnight and went across the river. And we was looking up the road and here come a whole bunch of Germans down the road, 'course a lot of them was giving up then. This was getting right up to the end, pretty much, and a lot of them were giving up. They come down the road about six to eight abreast; the road was full. There were some guys on horses riding alongside of 'em, and when they got down to us, why, we found out they was GIs and British. The Germans had give up and they'd got some—took their horses and riding alongside of them. They rode them right down to town.

We goofed around there a little while and picked up our guns, moved out of our emplacement and all this stuff, so we decided we would see what was going on. And we went up and went into this here camp.

MH: What did it look like from the outside? Was it barbed wire?

EC: Oh, yeah, yeah. I've got some pictures of it.

MH: Really?

EC: Yeah.

MH: What could you see when you were looking at it?

EC: Oh, all I could see was people starved to death—wasn't nothing but skin and bones—lookin' out through the wire at us. We went in there and was looking around and talking to a few of them that could talk. About that time, why here come a Jeep and a command car, drove up out in front, they jumped out and come running in there and told us to get out of there, we shouldn't even be in there.

MH: Why was that?

EC: I don't know. We was ones that liberated it and we couldn't be there, according to them. And really, what it was, I think it was the 36th Division, the 36th Division got the recognition for liberatin' the camp. (inaudible) it was already set up, like everything in the Army.

MH: Actually, both divisions got credit, because I'm looking at the list.

EC: Well, that's something different from what they told us. They run us out, so we left and went back to town there, which was—well, I don't know how far it was. It was, I think, between a half a mile and—half a mile and a mile up there. We went back there and they loaded us up and headed us out in another direction.

MH: When you were in there talking to the people, what was the conversation about?

EC: Oh, gosh, I can't tell you. They was telling how they've been starved to death and they was wanting something to eat. We gave them what free rations we had on us and that was it. But it was a mess.

MH: What else did you see, in the camp?

EC: Oh, hell, we saw a lot of people, a bunch of them were dead piled up there, and a bunch of 'em was down and out; they couldn't move. It was a mess.

MH: Did you go inside any of the buildings?

EC: Oh, yeah, we looked around there and seen where they'd been sleepin' and whatnot, but I'd say we probably wasn't in there more than fifteen or twenty minutes before they drove up and run us out.

MH: When you're in there, what do you feel like? I mean, what are you thinking?

EC: Oh, I really don't know. That's been sixty-seven years ago. Hard to say, but it was a mess.

MH: Did you take pictures?

EC: No, the pictures I've got was taken by the photographer for *Look* magazine. And he went right along with us and he'd take some—we didn't have a camera. I didn't have no camera. And of course, you're in the infantry, you couldn't carry one on. If you did, you wouldn't have got real far. I told him I'd like to have some of them pictures, so he says, "Well, I'll see that you get 'em." And then two or three days, 'course he'd go back at night and develop his and print 'em, and two or three days later, he give me these pictures.

MH: What do the pictures show?

EC: Oh, pictures show the camp, the front of the camp, guys standing out looking through the wire and shows the crematory oven deal. I dunno.

MH: Are there any pictures of you?

EC: Nope.

MH: Or other GIs?

EC: No, no, I don't remember. I'd have to dig 'em out and look, because I don't remember. They're right there. He was taking pictures of the camp and people in the camp and what-not.

MH: Do you have those pictures still?

EC: Yup.

MH: Would it be possible for me to borrow them and copy them?

EC: Oh, I can get 'em and send you some if you want 'em. I'll have to dig them out and find them first.

MH: Okay, the only reason that I ask is if I can borrow the originals is that I can scan them on the computer and get a real good copy. And then I'd—you know what? I've been asking guys to do—I'll send you a mailing envelope and I'll do that as soon as I get them and send them back to you.

EC: Okay.

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

EC: Oh, somewhere. (laughs)

MH: If you could find that, too, that would be great.

EC: Okay.

MH: But what I'll do is I'll put an envelope in the mail to you.

EC: Okay.

MH: And there's no rush. I mean, whenever you have time.

EC: Yeah.

MH: What did you do when you got home from the war?

EC: Oh, for a while I didn't do anything. But then I enrolled before I went to the service and I was goofing around here in farm supplies, things around here. They wanted me to drive a transport for them, so I drove a transport for them for a while. Didn't like that. And then I worked at a brickyard for a while and went to farmin'. And I'm living on a farm ever since.

MH: Where is Ellery, Illinois?

EC: Well, it's between Evansville, Indiana, and St. Louis, Missouri. Right across there, it's about twenty miles west of the Indiana border.

MH: Okay, I got it.

EC: It's on Route 15, about seven or eight miles above I-64 [Interstate 64].

MH: Did the experience you saw at the camp ever come back to you? You know, years later?

EC: Oh, yeah. I thought about it a lot of times. I thought about a lot of that a lot of times.

MH: You mean the war as well, obviously.

EC: Oh, yeah, everything.

MH: Still wake you up at night?

EC: Oh, no, doesn't wake me up much anymore, but I still think about it a lot. I was just a kid, kinda shook me up, you know?

MH: What were you, about twenty years old then?

EC: Yup, that's what I was.

MH: So that's a pretty hard thing to deal with as a twenty-year-old.

EC: Well, yeah, when you're just—see, I was raised on a farm, just a farm boy, and hadn't been kicked around a lot until I got in there, and then it was a different world.

MH: Yeah. Well, I thank you very much for your time, and I'll send you that letter and an envelope. And if you could find the pictures, I'd really appreciate it.

EC: Okey-dokey

MH: Thank you very much sir. Okay, bye-bye.

End of interview