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Delbert D. Cooper oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, September 5, 2008

Delbert D. Cooper (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. Your name is Delbert D. Cooper, C-o-o-p-e-r. I have a tape recorder on. And your address is...And your birthday is what, sir?

Delbert Cooper: Sixteen August. I just had my eighty-fifth.

MH: Oh, happy birthday to you. (DC laughs) In 19—the year was?

DC: Twenty-three [1923].

MH: Twenty-three [1923]. And you were with—which unit were you with?

DC: Fourteenth Infantry Regiment, Headquarters Company—14th Infantry Regiment, 71st [Infantry] Division.

MH: Okay. Where were you before going in the Army?

DC: Where was I?

MH: Yes.

DC: Here in Dayton.

MH: And you were in school, or—?

DC: Well, I graduated in 1941 from high school, and then I had various jobs around before I went in, in January of forty-three [1943].

MH: Drafted or volunteered?

DC: I volunteered, through the draft board. Yeah.

MH: And where'd they send you?

DC: They sent me to—well, Columbus is where we went in from Dayton. And then they sent us—I volunteered for the big guns, and they sent me up to above Chicago to Fort Sheridan, which no longer exists.

MH: I was actually based there and edited the newspaper there, when I was in the Army.

DC: You were? Well, doggone.

MH: In 1965.

DC: A heck of a swell place.

MH: Yup.

DC: And it was the—I think it was the 2nd of February of forty-three [1943] when I actually got up there to Sheridan from Columbus.

MH: How do you finally find your way to the 71st Infantry Division?

DC: Oh, God. We went from Chicago—Fort Sheridan—we went out on maneuvers in Oregon and Washington, and then down into California. And then, we were sent over to Mississippi, and then Texas, and then, let's see. From Texas—God, this is so long ago. From Texas, I went as a replacement—I came home in February for five days' delay en route, in which—the lady you talked to was my wife. We got married. Nineteen forty-five, yeah, February forty-five [1945].

Then, I left here and went over to the East Coast, going as a replacement overseas to Europe. And when I got over there, I was—they were having that Battle of the Bulge, or just after it, you know. I think they needed some cannon fodder, to tell you the truth. But anyway, I got into France and then from France, I was sent into Germany. I was a replacement to the 71st.

MH: Take me through, you know, up to Gunskirchen.

DC: Okay. We went through Germany—I met the 71st about a fourth of the way through Germany on the other side of the Rhine River, and went on over through Germany, down into Austria. When we got into Austria, I was as a replacement into the—which made me an extra man, like, really—which worked out real well for me at the time. I was a PFC [private first class] at the time. I got into Lambach, Austria. We moved—you know, kept moving, moving, moving; we were really rolling there. I went into Patton's 3rd Army to begin with, and they shifted us down into Austria.

The day I got into the camp—I went looking for some coffee, really. I had spent the night in Lambach, and I went down to the railroad station the next morning, relatively early. I spotted my captain, Captain [William R.] Swope, who is now deceased, I know; he was from Kentucky. I went through the railroad station, which was quite narrow there in Lambach, just a small place. I stepped through the door and, going out into like the railroad yards, something moved and I reflexed real fast. I saw a young fellow, like a kid, sitting against the wall of the railroad station there, and he was all scurvy looking and all that.

I walked back in the building and I said to the captain, "What is that out there, sir?" and he says, "Troop, there's a camp, a concentration camp—one of those concentration camps—about five clicks down the road." A click was a kilometer. And he said, "There's a truck going to be coming up here with a couple guys. We captured that train out there last night. It's a supply, a German supply train. Would you go out and break open a boxcar

and help those guys load?" I said—the captain's talking, I'm a PFC. I said, "Sure." So, I went out there, broke open one of the boxcars, and the truck came up, backing across all the railroad rails over. I helped him load, and I thought, Well, I might as well go along with him—somebody's gonna have to help him unload this.

MH: What were you taking out of the boxcar?

DC: Supplies, German supplies.

MH: Food?

DC: Food. Yeah, we were hoping we were getting food. We were. And the boxcar I happened to open—I either lucked out or the whole thing was loaded. I went with these guys, and as we were going along the road there in Austria, past Lambach, we started smelling something—and also seeing a lot of people along the road, with their goods and so forth. And they were throwing their hands in the air and prayin' and all that as we went by. We got out into where we turned off to go in these woods, and the people were just about to mob us, I'll tell you.

Anyway, we went on back into the woods—I don't know how far; a pretty good ways—and people were laying around dead. They'd tried to relieve themselves and all that. And anyway, they came running out and to us, and we got back in there and we had to stop. And we kept asking them to stay off the road, and—

MH: They didn't speak English, or did they?

DC: Some did. Some did. We asked who could speak English because we needed an interpreter to help unload, you know, and so forth, and keep order. So, we got back in there and stopped, and we got these guys who could speak English—probably better than I do. But, anyway, we asked them to get order here, for people to stay back, and help us unload.

MH: You were in just one deuce and a half [truck]?

DC: Yeah.

MH: And how many GIs?

DC: There was two guys, the driver, and me, that went in.

MH: So that's four people?

DC: Yeah. And I seem to remember a major being in the cab, but if he was, that's all. I just don't even—I wouldn't even mention it. But anyway, the people—you know, this is something new to us. We're not used to anything like this. And we shot our guns in the air and everything trying to get 'em back and so forth. They were just trying to mob us, which was understandable. I want you to understand what we're into there. Anyway, we had the people who spoke English to get some order for us, and we told 'em that we had a whole trainload of supplies, evidently, up the road—back down the road at Lambach—and there would be more supplies coming. And please tell the people—some of them would just fall over dead, they were just so skinny and so diseased.

MH: You could see that happening?

DC: Oh, yeah. My God, right in front of you, you know, one would fall over dead.

MH: How are you reacting to this? You're only, like, three months removed from saying goodbye to your wife in the States.

DC: Yeah. Well, we had some good training; I'll say that, some hard training here in the States. We was young, and just—that was it, you know. You were there, you were kind of numb. My God, they were dead—of course we'd seen dead people; I was in the infantry, you know, and all that. And we just—one came up, I know. I don't know whether he or it, was gonna kiss me or something, and a hand shot across in front of my face and it was one of the guys who spoke English, saying, "Whoa, what are you doing?" and he pointed at the lice and everything on the person. I said, "Oh, don't do that. We're gonna have medics coming along. Tell everybody to stay off the road, and we'll get 'em taken care of."

MH: Was there a wire fence, or a fence around this place?

DC: I cannot remember a fence at all.

MH: So you don't know whether you drove through a gate?

DC: No, I do not. We just turned off the road and started back through the woods there. I would assume that there was some kind of a—it was a relatively new place that they marched these people to, I guess from another camp down there. And there was a lot of 'em there. Anyway, I remember one old man sitting on a big boulder, farther back from where we were, and I can see right him now, throwing his arms up—or hands up into the sky—and praying, giving thanks, you know, that they were saved. And we kept telling 'em, “Look, you're gonna be safe. We got food, medics will be coming. We've got to go on; the war was still being fought.”

Anyway, we came back out. I can remember coming back out and going back to the railroad station, and I checked the train. My father had worked on a railroad, and I was a little bit familiar with trains and how they operated, the steam engines. So I went to the engine on this train—it was hooked onto this supply train—and I climbed up in it, and there was a woman—I guess she was a fireman, I don't know. But anyway, she was smiling and so on and so forth. Of course, she didn't know what I was gonna do, you know. What I did was to put my foot on the pedal and open the fire box door to make sure there was a good fire in there, and I told my captain, “You know, sir, we might as well take the whole train down there, if we can get it down there, because the rails run right by the camp.” Right along the road, you know. So, he drove the thing down, I guess.

I went on then. I did not go back into the camp. I went on to continue on. I got separated from the outfit, of course, and most people didn't even know that I had gone into a camp. It was another—it was, I think, the 5th Regiment that had gone through the place in the night, I guess. I don't know where these couple guys that I was with were from. I have no idea where they were from—the soldiers, you know. But we went along and it started raining and so forth, and we stopped at a farmhouse on up the road. I was looking for my outfit, then, you know. I wanted to find them so I wouldn't be considered deserting or anything.

We stopped in a farmhouse to get something to eat. We just walked in, and whatever they had—if they had anything, we'd just take it; you know how that goes. Even in Austria, 'cause they were still the enemy; however, we did notice a difference in their attitude. There were several German soldiers in there sitting at the table, and there was a couple of French DPs—displaced persons, that's what we called 'em, DPs. One of 'em said to me, “SS.” I can't speak French; I couldn't speak German or anything. So, I told these guys we was with, “Hey, this guy says there's a couple of SS around here, so I'll go with him.” Big old brave me, you know. Anyway, the SS were the tough guys, and they'd just as soon shoot you as look at you.

I went out with this guy. I had picked up a couple pistols earlier in the war back there, when I first joined the outfit. And I went out with him, and he pointed towards the barn, and I—this little old village, I don't know the name of it. Anyway, I peeked around the corner, and there's a guy, young fellow, standing out in the barn lot. He's bare from the waist up, and he's got civilian trousers on. And this French DP said "SS." I pointed and I said "SS?" and he said yeah. So, I put my hands behind me with the pistol and I started walking out toward him. He said there was two, there was only one; this is how you luck out.

So, I went walking up to this fellow and I said to him in German, "*Deutsch Soldat?*" and he just kept looking at me. I walked right up to him, and when I said that, he just kept looking at me. I whipped the pistol out from behind me and put it right on his chest and I started to squeeze the trigger; thank God they were new pistols. And I thought, Raise your arm—you know, give me a real excuse to shoot him. Other than that, I'm murdering him.

So, anyway, one of the other guys came around the barn, and he said, "Shoot the SOB, Cooper." And I stepped back a pace, handed the pistol toward him, and said, "You shoot him." Well, he wasn't going to murder him either, you know. So I says, "We better take him with us." Now the German soldiers, we just took 'em out—when we were going to leave, took 'em out to the end of the little lane, like, and pointed back. We had 'em in columns of twos—there were, I think, about eight of 'em—and told 'em, "March!" And we took the SS guy with us.

MH: Did you see a tattoo?

DC: No. No, I didn't see it. I wanted him to raise his arm, you know. No, I did not see a tattoo. But this French guy, this DP, said "SS," and I was gonna believe him, you know. And remember, I wasn't over there very long before I'm into all this stuff. So anyway, I thought, Jesus, it's started getting dark, and I have to find my outfit. What'll they think? The captain was the only one I saw that I knew in the outfit, and knew that I had gone into this camp. So, I kept asking for the 14th Infantry as we went along and we'd meet an MP [military police] or somebody stationed wherever there was a road, you know, to direct people. And the first one we came to, I said to this guy driving a jeep—I don't know who they were at all, except they were American soldiers. I said, "Hey, let's get rid of this SS guy." I had sat in the back of the jeep holding a pistol on him. So, we gave him to one of the MPs, and we kept asking people for the 14th Infantry.

MH: Did you ever let the guy put his shirt back on?

DC: Oh, no. I never even saw a shirt. Yeah. He was—that was the easiest thing we could've done with him, gave him his shirt if we'd have found it. So, anyway, he was still in civilian trousers, and all I said to the MP was, "This guy's an SS man." So, I finally hitched a ride on one of these little—it was a little old Model A Ford, I think—and I kept going up wherever it went, up to this little old village. I saw my captain in a little hut, working on his daily report. And I went in and reported to him, and he said, "Troop, the boys are down in the barn." So, I went out and went down—

MH: Doesn't sound like he was too worried about you not showing up.

DC: Oh, no. I think he figured I would, whenever I could find it. Or, maybe he was concerned that something had happened to me and I wouldn't, and then he'd be in trouble. I don't know.

MH: How many miles away from the camp do you think you were at that point?

DC: From that camp?

MH: Yeah.

DC: Oh, God, probably—we were down, of course, to Linz, not too far from Linz, I discovered later, Austria. So, we must have been twenty-five, thirty miles. I really don't know. Remember, different conditions and times. But I have been back to the place where I ended the war, there at that little place. And, like I say, the next morning I got up and went up to the captain again, 'cause I worked directly for him, you know, and told him, "Here I am, if there's anything." So, I went outside this little hut where he was in and wrote a letter to my wife, the lady you talked to earlier today—who will be eighty-four in about a week, I think, the 1st of September. Yeah. (laughs)

MH: I don't think you're supposed to tell those things.

DC: I'm not supposed to tell 'em, no. Big mouth, huh? (laughs) I made it through the war, anyway, and the next time she saw me was the last day of April, 1946. That was over a year, but we wrote, communicated and all that.

MH: Did you write her a letter about the camp you had found?

DC: Yes. Oh, yes.

MH: Do you still have that letter?

DC: I gave the letter to a museum in New York. I gave them that, I gave them the mess kit—I wrote the letter—used [the kit] as a desk, like, to write the letter on the back of it. I gave 'em two or three other things. Oh, one of the inmates had given me a little yellow star that the Jews evidently had to wear; he'd taken it off his little dirty thing, and took it off and gave it to me. I kept that, and I sent it home to my wife and told her to keep it. And it's in a museum up there in New York City, too.

MH: Did you happen to keep a copy of the letter?

DC: Oh, yeah. I've given—there's a copy of the letter at the Air Force Museum out here at Wright-Patterson [Air Force Base], and one copy—the original letter—at the [Holocaust] Museum in Washington.

MH: I just wondered if there's a way you could make me a copy and send it to me.

DC: Probably.

MH: There's a couple things I'd like. Do you have a photo of yourself from World War II?

DC: (laughs). Yeah.

MH: What I'd like is a picture of you then, a picture of you now, and a copy of the letter. And what I'd like to do is send you a photo envelope to mail it to me, and I'll scan it and send it back to you.

DC: The letter?

MH: The letter, the—

DC: Oh, the photo?

MH: The photos, yeah.

DC: Well, if I send them, you can keep them.

MH: But, I mean, are they good copies? 'Cause, I'd like to scan them so that I could use them.

DC: Yeah. In fact, I just saw a copy two days ago, a copy of the photo, and it was real good. And I think it was an extra copy.

MH: Okay. But if not, I have no problem with scanning it and sending it back to you. I'll send you an envelope so you can mail it to me.

DC: Okay.

MH: Tell me, when you went into that camp, do you remember what kind of day it was? And what time of day it was?

DC: Well, it was in the morning, that's pretty obvious. It was probably, I imagine—I want to guess probably 7:30 or 8:30 in the morning.

MH: Was it a nice spring day?

DC: Oh, it was a nice day, mild day down there in Austria. I think it was the 5th of May. I think that was the date.

MH: Actually, I can tell you. Well, what they say here is that the 71st got there on May 4th. So, that might have been the 5th of May that you got there.

DC: Mm-hm.

MH: What else do you remember about the people in the camp? I mean, there was that one person sitting there at the railroad station. Did you ever see him again?

DC: Oh, no. I wouldn't have recognized him anyway, I'm sure. They were a pretty scummy looking bunch, you know; they were just so skinny and dirty and crummy, and there was those that had the lice and all that stuff on 'em. They were just a terrible looking bunch.

MH: You said there was one person who gave you the Jewish star off his uniform. Did you see a lot of people wearing stars?

DC: I don't recall. I really don't recall whether they were or not. I think most of 'em were Hungarian Jewish people; that's what somebody told us when we were in there. We were—actually, we didn't know when the war was gonna be over; all we knew was we were movin' and movin' fast now, right there at the very end of the war. And we knew if we were gonna be alive. Course, you didn't really worry about that; you just went on and did whatever you were gonna do and did it.

MH: You were carrying an M1?

DC: I had an M1. No, I did not carry it. The rifle that was issued to me in France—at Metz, France—I'm telling you, I never fired it one time after I left France. Any firing I did, I borrowed a carbine—and shot a German once—from a guy. But that rifle, I'm almost positive, had been run over with a tank or a truck, 'cause the barrel was bent. And I told everybody—I called it “Mr. Suicide.”

MH: (laughs)

DC: (laughs) I aimed—when we were in France, in Metz, to do the firing practice when—they issued you new uniforms and everything, or different uniforms, when you got over there, and the latest equipment. I shot at—I was an expert rifleman, by the way—and when I fired that thing, it must have hit just in a relatively short range, three or four feet from where I was aiming. (MH laughs) And I told somebody, “I'm not going to use this damn thing. That's pure suicide.” That's what I called it. So I just—any firing had to be done, I'd either use a pistol, or that borrowed carbine that time.

MH: So you were on the truck going into the camp, you were just carrying a pistol then.

DC: Yeah. All I had was my pistols. I went in there, and I had plenty of ammunition for 'em, I'll say that.

MH: What were they, .38s, .45s?

DC: No, 9mm.

MH: Nine mm, back then?

DC: Mm-hm.

MH: They were American, or German?

DC: I think Italian. Just a second—I'll keep talking to you, but I'll walk in. I still have one of 'em. Somebody stole one, 'cause you had to turn your weapons in after the war. I had to turn both these pistols in, and they were brand new. They had cosmoline on them, the original cosmoline. I took 'em out of an old lady's bag in—I think it was in the town of Amberg. We were going through, and we'd just come in and things were pretty hot, you know. And she came—the Germans had to turn in any weapons. I saw some of the most beautiful swords and stuff you can ever imagine.

This old lady—I go down by the place where they were throwing 'em through the window, probably the town house. Anyway, she came up, and the Germans carried big bags back then—still do, I guess. She came up to me, sidled up to me, and opened the big bag. I looked in, and there were two big brand new holsters. And I thought, Oh, boy! I had my cartridge belt on, of course, for the rifle. And I had my jacket open, down. I was looking for just such an opportunity, and when I looked in and saw that, I reached in with my hand, grabbed both those pistols, put 'em in my jacket and zipped it up, thanked the lady and walked on.

MH: (laughs)

DC: I got 'em home—somebody, like I say, stole one of 'em. I've still got the other one. I got it in my hand right this minute. In fact, I'm taking it out of its holster.

MH: Be careful.

DC: Oh, yeah. It's a Beretta, and it's a 9mm, 7.65 is what it says caliber.

MH: And you had no problem getting bullets for it?

DC: Oh, no. Oh, my God, no. This was definitely in use over there. It's a 1944 date on it, and I'd say this was 1945.

MH: It was brand new.

DC: Yeah. Oh, yeah. Original cosmoline on 'em. And I just thought, Oh, boy, I gotta have a pistol—two of 'em. And then I got home with one.

MH: So, you were two-gun Cooper. (laughs)

DC: Yeah. (laughs) Except no one know who I was or anything. We have a fellow that wrote a book about the camp, and he swore up and down I wasn't at the camp. I said, "What the hell are you talking about? Did you read that letter that I wrote to the wife? How could I not be in the camp and write something like that?" I wouldn't have gone to work when I got out—I'd have been like you, a writer, I guess.

MH: Who wrote the book?

DC: Oh, God, I'd have to—

MH: I mean, was it one of the GIs?

DC: Oh, yeah; he was an officer. And he wrote—I think it was *On Guard*, I think it was what he called it.¹

¹ *On Guard: The Fourteenth Infantry Regiment in Bavaria 1945-6*, by Gerald McMahon. Published in 1990 by Yaderman Books.

MH: You think he's still alive?

DC: Uh, he could be. I talked to him a few years ago, once, when I told him that I'd been in. After he wrote the book, I told him that I had been in there, and was still alive and all that. *On Guard*, I believe, is what he called it. I've got a copy of it around here someplace or other—a paperback, you know.

MH: If there's a way—if you have some time, if you could find his name, I'd appreciate that. But tell me—you probably spent what, less than an hour in that camp?

DC: Oh, no, it was longer—probably a couple of hours.

MH: A couple of hours.

DC: 'Cause we had this truck to unload, and—well, the one thing I remember doing, a little extra. I walked—there were some buildings in there, of course, and I walked over. I told these guys I was with, "I'm gonna walk over here and look in a building." And my God, the stench all over this place—you know, the excrement was all over, piles of excrement all over. I walked over and I opened the door and looked in. And these photos that you see of two or three people laying on top of each other in little old wooden beds like—it's true, 'cause it was there in that place. And the stench, I can still smell that place today, that camp.

MH: When you opened the door and see the people, do they say anything?

DC: They don't say anything. This makes you proud to be an American. They recognized the fact that we were Americans; I guess they heard us, probably out there, or maybe somebody from out there had gone to that building. And there was one guy I can remember, he raised up. He was laying on top of another guy, and he just raised up and looked really white—you know, pale, and all that. And just kind of, "Oh, my God, we're saved," you know. You could see that in his face.

MH: They didn't say anything, though.

DC: Not a thing. And I immediately went away from that place, I didn't want to get in there and go disturbing things around, you know, 'cause I was the only one over there by the building.

MH: Are you wearing a helmet or a hat or anything?

DC: Oh, yeah, you had to wear a hat.

MH: So, have you got a helmet on, or just a hat?

DC: I don't think I had a helmet on. I think I just had, like, the little cloth cap on. And I had on naturally a uniform. You wore a Class B uniform, really. You had on your green, you know, Class A uniform, except you had a field jacket on.

MH: You're not wearing fatigues or that sort of thing?

DC: No, we were wearing regular uniforms. And the fatigue jacket, or the field jacket, that's more fatigue. I had that, of course.

MH: You wearing boots or shoes?

DC: Boots, the regular—in fact, the Eisenhower—we didn't have the leggings then. When we got over there, when they issued us new boots, they were really good. I don't know whether I gave those—I probably gave those, if I still had 'em, to the Museum, too.

MH: So, you're in the camp for a couple of hours. Did the people immediately start eating the food and stuff that was on that truck?

DC: In giving them out—these were liter cans, and of course we weren't used to liters at that time, you know; we used our method, sixteen ounce and so forth. Anyway, as we gave them to the people, we told them to have someone—the guys that spoke English, we told 'em, "Have someone carefully issue them out, and put at least two people on a can." And that was probably too much, probably killed some of 'em, because too much at one time, you know. And that was it. I gave 'em—we, always, from eating C rations, had your little can opener.

MH: The P-38.

DC: Yeah, had plenty of those in our pockets, you know. And plenty of the little four-packs of cigarettes and all that, which we threw out to the people, and they really enjoyed a cigarette. We halved them and everything else to try to spread 'em and make 'em go as far as we can. Remember, we were all alone. We did what we thought we had to do, and I thought we did all right at the time.

MH: It sounds like it. Nobody had warned you at that point about not feeding them because it could kill them.

DC: Oh, no. No. You get in there, and there you are, you know. We told 'em, though, you know, "Just watch it." We would tell 'em if they ate too much.

MH: You give 'em matches with the cigarettes, too?

DC: Yeah, you had your little packs of matches, too. We made sure they were all right—or we even lit them for 'em after we broke them in two and handed 'em to them.

MH: Here's a test of your memory: what brand cigarettes?

DC: I don't know whether they were Camels, Luckys, Chesterfields—it weren't one of those type. Phillip Morris; it was probably Luckys or Camels.

MH: There were some GIs who gave cigarettes to the inmates of the camps and the inmates started eating them.

DC: I wouldn't doubt that, yeah. They had to have something, you know. But they smoked these, what I saw, what little bit I saw.

MH: When you came home, when's the first time you told people about what you'd seen at that camp?

DC: I don't recall, really. We were more interested in getting started with our life and getting a job and all that, you know. So, I really don't know when was the first time. I'd written that good letter—about eleven or twelve pages long—to my wife and asked her to keep it and have Dad or somebody make a copy, type a copy, you know.

So, anyway, they kept it. And like I say, I went up to the State Department when they called for liberators to come up, and I went up. While I was up there I met the lady from New York, and she said she—I heard her say she had a museum in a high school. And I said, "Hey, I'll try to get up there. I've got some things I'll give you." And the wife and I went up—I can't remember offhand, two or three years later. I came home in forty-six [1946], the last day of April forty-six [1946]. We went up and I gave her this stuff, and I told her, "It's yours." Never asked for anything, never wanted anything, just get the word out to people and let 'em see that what they've been reading and so forth was true.

Well, she got it, and then they built a museum, in Brooklyn, this outfit did. And the wife and I went up one time and we were in a—the wife doesn't care for large towns. So, we went in the museum and this lady wasn't there. She happened to be in some other office by now. So, we came back, and the wife wanted to get out of New York, so we left and came on back home.

MH: Have you ever run into people who said that the Holocaust didn't happen?

DC: No. They won't tell me that. I'd say, "Oh, it didn't? I wonder what I was dreamin' and drinkin'."

MH: (laughs) Or drinking.

DC: (laughs) You're right, that's one of the things we looked for. We soon learned that there was good wines around over there and all that; the beer wasn't worth a darn, even then, because it's probably about 1 percent. But the wines were very good and if we could get wine, by George! One of the hardest jobs we had was to open up—the wife's laughing (laughs)—open up the bottles and get the cork out, you know. We didn't realize how to do it. You know, they got those corks down in, and then the little metal—

MH: Foil?

DC: No, a metal wire that goes down and holds the cork in. Anyway, that was one of the hardest jobs we had to do. I think sometimes we'd even just break the bottle open to get a

drink. And somebody finally showed us what to do. You take both thumbs and put it on each side of the bottle, the wire container, and push and it just slipped right up. And then you can just put the cork back on, 'cause it doesn't fly off, you know, it just flips up. (laughs) And that was one of the hardest jobs—I still laugh about that—trying to get a drink.

MH: What did you do when you can home? What job did you have, what career did you have?

DC: I was—I'd run a screwing machine operator; a screwing machine is like—you know. And one of the things I did, I wanted to get in personnel. I kind of liked that, and I knew, just from my nature. Anyway, I went to work—I took a couple of college courses here locally, personnel, administration and personnel testing. Under the VA [Veterans Affairs]—I got under the training program. I got that, and then they were able to place me in the Huffman Manufacturing Company for six months of training. And, oh, that was one of the best jobs I had, really, back then. I really enjoyed that. I got in the training program and all that, and then when that was up, they had to let me go, Huffman Manufacturing, and they did.

Then I was able to jack around in other jobs; you know, I ran machinery. In fact, I was working at the Standard Register Company—you know, we had the GI Bill and GI Rights. Working in personnel, I knew quite a bit about it by then, and I put on to go to work for the government, because if you went to work for the government, you were almost assured you weren't going to be let go. So, I was working at the Standard Register Company as an inspector on the night shift. A fellow by the name of Cooper, by the way, happened to be my trainer. You had to have extremely good color acuity because of the type of work they did.

Anyway, I put in out here at the base. Wright Field is not far away from me, you know, the Wright-Patterson. And anyway, when I went to work—put in to work with them—and I got a notification to come to work, I told 'em, "Put in at the Standard Register." They said, "Are you sure you're leaving?" I said, "Yes. I'm gonna take a decrease in salary, and so forth, but I will have some rights which I don't have here." Okay. I found out—you know what job they were going to put me in, at the end of this training? They were going to put me in charge of the personnel at the Standard Register Company. You may have heard of that company, I don't know. My God, I'd really have been wealthy there, with the stocks and so forth I would've got.

But I went on to—I think I was a GS-4 when I went out to work as a clerk in supply at the Wright-Patt out here. I worked two years, and they were going to transfer me to Ogden, Utah. I said, "No, I'm a Dayton boy, and I'm going to stay in Dayton. Anybody

else around here hiring anybody?” And they said, “You might go out to the Dayton Air Force Depot,” which is about the same distance from my home, but still here in Dayton. So, I went out, and I was able to transfer. Instead of going to Utah, I was able to go right out here.

I stayed there for twenty years, and retired. I retired quite young, by the way. I retired the 30th of April 1972, from my regular job. I had a total of twenty-five years of seniority and so forth, and then I was able to go work at anyplace else I wanted to, you know. So, I did work at some other places.

MH: You have children?

DC: One child, who just turned sixty-one, by the way. Was it sixty-one she turned? Yeah, sixty-one the 14th of August. My birthday, my eighty-fifth, was the 16th of August. The wife's, like I say, eighty-fourth—I'll tell on her at any rate—is coming up the 1st of September.

MH: Did the stuff you had seen at that camp ever come back to you later in life?

DC: You mean as a nightmare?

MH: Yeah.

DC: No. No, I think one of the things that kind of helped me was the fact that I had been raised in the country, like, on the edge of Dayton where there's hardly anybody, near farms. There was a farmer nearby, and he'd butcher hogs and cattle and all this kind of stuff. And to kill a hog, you either cut its throat or hit it in the head and all that kind of stuff with a sledgehammer and ax. And I think that kind of helped me, because I was used to death, of a sort, but not of people. But then when it became people, well, you just had to do what you had to do. I became, finally, a sergeant before I left the Army.

But no, the smell—I can smell that place right now. That is the most lingering thing. And, of course, the people; they knew they were saved, you know, and it was so good to be an American. And the flag—boy, I can't just stand anyone downgrading our flag, when these people knew we were Americans that were in this place.

MH: You said that the German civilians—actually, you said the Austrian civilians had a different attitude than the German civilians.

DC: It was a different feeling, like. We could sense it, you know what I mean? If you were sensitive at all, you could kind of sense the fact that, well, the Germans were a little bit apprehensive of us, you know, they didn't know what we were gonna do. I know we had some tough guys and all this kind of stuff, but still in all, humans are humans, you know. You gotta be human. And I never roughed any of 'em up. A little squirt like me, I could have. I could just hit 'em in the head and that'd been it, you know.

MH: There were—I can't tell you how many veterans have told me that after they saw the camps, the line you hear is, "We didn't take any prisoners that day," or, "We didn't take any prisoners after that."

DC: Well, I told you what I did. We took prisoners later that day, German soldiers, and took 'em out—like I said, when we went to leave to go on, I still had to find my outfit.

MH: What kept you from being so angry that you just wanted to just retaliate against any German?

DC: I think that you are either a murderer or a killer. I can be a killer, but I discovered that day I wasn't a murderer. And there is a difference. Now, had that fellow—when I walked up to him in that barn lot, had he raised his arm to attack me like—I walked right up and put this pistol right here, almost against his chest, and that man knew he was dying, because I was going to kill him. And he was just—I needed resistance. You just don't run out and shoot somebody, even right in the middle of the war, even after you've been in a place like that the same day. I didn't, anyway, and neither did these other guys, 'cause this other guy couldn't kill him either, whoever he was. I don't know who he was.

But I was hopin'—I'll tell you, in plain language, now, exactly what I thought: "Raise your arm, you son-of-a-bitch." That's what was in my head. I wanted him to raise his—give me resistance, which I could construe as resistance. And when he didn't, I'm not just gonna shoot him down.

MH: But, I mean, there were other GIs who would make a different choice in the same circumstance.

DC: Oh, yes. Oh, yeah, yeah, heaven's sake. See, I hadn't been in combat all that long, either.

MH: Maybe that's the difference.

DC: That helped, even though—death-wise, I remember one day going out on patrol with one of our guys. We'd had several wounded or killed at a river crossing. The guy in the charge of the I & R [Intelligence & Reconnaissance] platoon, the sergeant—the lieutenant, I think, had been shot. Anyway, he asked if anybody—he needed some help. So, big old me, I'll help him. I went out with another guy in a jeep. You patrolled ahead of your unit, to see if there's any resistance up there, what you're gonna run into.

We were goin' down this road, and you learned real fast if the Germans put a white flag out, or a white tablecloth or anything, they were actually giving up. You could believe 'em. Now, remember, this was not far from the end of the war. So, as we were going down this road, we saw something up along the road. I was riding shotgun for this guy who was driving the Jeep, and I got ready to fire on what we were comin' up on, if need be. We got up there, and there was an officer, a German officer, alongside the road. His brains were blown out of his head and his guts were ripped open and all this. I thought, Wow, something's going through here. I think it was the Air Force probably really gave it to this guy.

But then, a little later, we noticed: no white flags hangin' out the windows. We both noticed it at the same time, we looked at each other, and we said, "Let's get the hell out of here." So, he ripped that jeep around and went full speed back, and we told 'em everything was clear for several clicks on up the road. And that was about it. You just had to keep yourself, you know, under control, like.

Like I say, I think there was about seventeen of us in my family that were in, cousins and brother—my brother was in the Navy. He was in the aircraft carrier *Saratoga* [CV-3] at Iwo Jima. I think it was four kamikazes or something that came into that thing. They had to come back to the States to get the thing repaired. And he never would talk about it. All I said was, "You kind of got rattled around a little bit down there, didn't you?" And he was down in a hold as a machineman, you know. He would never talk very much. He was quite reticent about talking.

MH: Anything else you can think of telling me about that camp?

DC: Well, I think I told the wife it was 1,500 or 1,700—that's what somebody had told me—in the camp, how many people were in here. And I guess it was more like 15,000 or 17,000. I knew it was a lot of 'em.

MH: Right. Men and women.

DC: Yeah. Oh, yeah. One woman came walking up towards me as we were helping unloading and direct these people. She was pointing in her mouth and, of course, crying and all that, and she came right up towards me. I knew to stay away, because of the lice and the disease, I guess.

MH: How do you stop her?

DC: Well, I just put my hand up, I was gonna stop her. I didn't try. One of the other guys did; in fact, he hit one of the guys, and I made him stop. "Leave him alone." My God, they knew they were saved. I tell people, you couldn't be more proud of the American flag than going in there with us that day.

MH: What did this woman do? She was coming towards you?

DC: She came up, putting her finger towards her mouth; she was hungry. And, of course, we had given away about everything we'd had. We didn't have—that we had on us, you know, and we were unloading the cans and stuff. There was quite a number of eggs. Somebody—I don't know who—must have been on the truck when it came up to us. I told one of the guys, "Take these eggs and give 'em to the women and children." Now whether she ever got an egg or not, I don't know. There's only so many eggs and thousands of people in there.

But then, some of 'em would just fall over dead. Other ones were laying all over the woods with their trousers down where they tried to relieve themselves and just fall over dead. Once you're into that, you know—I wouldn't want to go into it today, but I would know basically how to react today, that's for sure. Yeah.

MH: If I send you an envelope, would you be able to make a copy of that letter and send it to me?

DC: I will do my very best. (to wife) Do we have a copy of that letter around her someplace? I know we do.

Mrs. Cooper: We should have.

DC: We should have, yeah.

MH: I'll send you an envelope with a letter asking about the letter, and some photos as well.

DC: Okay. I'll get the photo—I know there's a photo, 'cause I saw it the other day—of when we came back into Germany. No photo of the camp, though.

MH: Right. No, I understand.

DC: When we came back into Germany, at (inaudible), I had a photo—it's a beautiful photo, I think (laughs)—in a Class A uniform, you know, and I have that. I'll send that to you.

MH: Is it a small photo, or is it large?

DC: Small.

MH: Okay. And if you have a current photo—even if you have a current one of you and your wife, I wouldn't mind having that to be able to use.

DC: Okay, a photo of you and me, Joanne.

MH: I'll send you a letter.

DC: Oh, okay. Whatever you want—anything I send, if you can keep it, I'll just tell you to keep it, you know.

MH: Okay, but I have no problem sending it back to you. Okay?

DC: Mm-hm.

MH: Thank you very much. It's really been wonderful talking with you. I appreciate it.

DC: Well, it's good to talk about it again, I guess. (laughs) Wait a minute.

Mrs. Cooper: Did you get his address?

DC: No, I didn't get his address. He's gonna send me—yeah.

MH: I'll send you—you don't have e-mail, do you?

DC: No, I haven't gone in for any of that stuff.

MH: Okay. Well, then, I'll send you a letter; it'll go out tomorrow.

DC: Okay.

MH: Thank you very much, Delbert. I appreciate it.

DC: Okay.

MH: Bye-bye.

DC: Bye-bye.

End of interview