

September 2008

Jack Richard DeWitt oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, September 5, 2008

Jack Richard DeWitt (Interviewee)

Michael Hirsh (Interviewer)

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Scholar Commons Citation

DeWitt, Jack Richard (Interviewee) and Hirsh, Michael (Interviewer), "Jack Richard DeWitt oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, September 5, 2008" (2008). *Digital Collection - Holocaust & Genocide Studies Center Oral Histories*. Paper 45.
http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/hgstud_oh/45

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Concentration Camp Liberators Oral History Project
Oral History Program
Florida Studies Center
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Digital Object Identifier: C65-00028
Interviewee: Jack Richard DeWitt (JD)
Interviewer: Michael Hirsh (MH)
Interview date: September 5, 2008
Interview location: Conducted by telephone
Transcribed by: Kathy Kirkland
Transcription date: January 24, 2009
Audit Edit by: Mary Beth Isaacson, MLS
Audit Edit date: January 27, 2010
Final Edit by: Kimberly Nordon
Final Edit date: February 8, 2010

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

MH: I just want to—your full name, is it Jack or is it John?

JD: It's Jack.

MH: Jack DeWitt? D-e

JD: My middle name is Richard, last name's DeWitt. D as in Dick, E as in Edward, W as in William, I as in Isaac, T as in Tom, T as in Tom.

MH: And do you capitalize the W?

JD: Yes, you do.

MH: And your date of birth sir is what?

JD: December 15, 1918.

MH: Can you just tell me—what unit were you in, in World War II?

JD: Well, I was transferred from lots of different units. I started off—when I enlisted as private, they thought I'd make a good person as a medic because I'd worked my way through school at the packing house. I was able to drive a truck. (laughs) But I went to OCS [Officer Candidate School], Armored OCS, at Fort Knox. Came out of there a lieutenant, and I served with the 48th Armored Division. When they reorganized, that was the 48th Tank Battalion, and I was transferred from there to the 19th Armored Infantry. I served overseas in A Company of the 19th as a lieutenant, and then I was made a captain in charge of C Company of the 19th. At the time you're speaking of when we liberated these people, I was the captain of C Company.

MH: Of an armored infantry unit.

JD: What's that?

MH: It was an armored infantry unit?

JD: Armored infantry unit, yes.

MH: At what point in the war did you come to this particular camp we're talking about?

JD: Well, it would have to be—I was transferred to C Company the first of February, 1945, so it would have to be after that, because I was a captain at the time this took place.

MH: And do you know what camp it was, or what city it was near?

JD: I honestly don't. It was towards the end of the war down in southern Germany, in Bavaria, and it was—as I recall, it was before we liberated Moosburg [an der Isaar].

MH: Okay. Um—

JD: It was after Hammelburg. I don't know the exact date, exact detail, or what the camp was. I think it was some kind of a work camp; there were a lot of women doing something or other, I don't know what it was.

MH: Tell me, what was your first sight of this place?

JD: I have no recollection.

MH: Okay. Did you go—

JD: My recollection, as we got there in the evening, took the place—I don't think there was any fighting involved. I don't recall any; we may have killed a few guards or something. But it would be—I think it would be after Hammelburg and before Moosburg. Not very much before Moosburg, I don't believe.

MH: Okay. What do you recall seeing?

JD: (laughs) I don't recall seeing anything. The normal thing for me to do, as an officer, was to outpost the place, you know.

MH: What does that mean?

JD: Well, it means you put guards out so you won't get surprised at all. This was on the edge of the camp.

MH: Any recollection as to how big this place was?

JD: There were quite a few people. I don't remember whether they were German nationals or displaced persons. I think they were displacements, but I honestly don't remember.

MH: Were they walking around in those striped uniforms?

JD: What's that?

MH: Were the prisoners wearing those striped uniforms?

JD: I don't think so. I think these were women. I think they had on dresses, but don't hold me to it because my recollection's hazy.

MH: So, tell me what else you recall seeing.

JD: Not much. As I recall, we left in the morning to go further south in Bavaria. Again, we may have stayed there till noon or something like that, I don't really know.

MH: Was the camp surrounded by barbed wire or by a stone wall?

JD: I don't recall either.

MH: Really?

JD: It may have been barbed wire. But again, my memory is hazy. We went through so many things toward the end there, so rapidly.

MH: Did it have that wretched smell that so many guys described?

JD: Did it have what?

MH: The smell that so many guys have described? There weren't piles of dead bodies, that sort of thing?

JD: No, I didn't see those dead bodies piled up until after the war.

MH: Did you talk to any of the women who were in the camp?

JD: I don't recall specifically talking to any of them. I may have, but I don't speak very good German. I speak very poor French, and not many of them spoke English. I don't know—this may have been something: Once we took the place over, I would call the lieutenants together and assign different things for them to take care of, you know. But

this was a temporary deal, as I recall, because I think we took the place. I don't think there was any fighting for it, or whether it was a liberation or whether they were Germans that were supporting Hitler. Hitler had them working at something or other, furthering his war effort, as I recall. But whether these people were doing it reluctantly or with enthusiasm, I don't recall. I think it was reluctantly.

MH: Did they look like they were well fed?

JD: No, I don't think so. Of course, very few people were well fed in Germany at that time. Unless someone was a farmer, you know.

MH: So, you probably left there, you said, sometime the next morning.

JD: That's my recollection, although it might have been noon or it might have been the next evening.

MH: In the final weeks of the war, did you run into any other camps or any other—you know, what they call the death marches on the roads?

JD: No, I didn't see the death marches. As we came close to Moosburg, there were soldiers, and usually officers, that had gotten out of the camp and traveled as individuals or small groups, you know.

MH: You said that after the war, you saw the piles of dead bodies. Where was that?

JD: That was at Dachau.

MH: At Dachau?

JD: Yeah. I didn't see it until two or three weeks after the war. What happened was they wanted to get all the medical personnel up there they could. And Dr. Hager, who was our battalion surgeon, went up there. (coughs) Excuse me. And when he came back, he told me, "You've got to see that, Jack," so I went up there. By the time I got there, there weren't any bodies piled in the railroad cars, but people were walking around, so emaciated. Their thighs were about the size of my wrist, you know, and they were terribly weak. They had taken pictures, and I got pictures of the piled up bodies on the flat cars

and so forth, and of the ovens and what have you. So, I simply visited up there after the war; it would be probably two or three weeks after the war ended.

MH: A number of veterans that I've interviewed said that after seeing the camps during the war—

(coughs) Excuse me. (coughs) Pardon me.

After seeing the camps, the thing they'd say is, "We didn't take any prisoners that day," or, "After that, we didn't take any prisoners for a week." Is that something that, as a soldier and an officer, you understand?

JD: Yes, indeed.

MH: Can you explain it? Because there are other people who go, "Well, there's the Geneva Convention and you have to take prisoners," et cetera, et cetera.

JD: Well, I don't think you're just going around and killing people, you know. But, of course, in a combat situation, as long as the other German soldier has a breath of life in him and access to a gun or a grenade or something like that, he's a threat to you unless he's killed. You can't very well—in the middle of an attack, you can't very well take along prisoners, even under the best of circumstances where you simply send a prisoner to the rear, you know. You don't try to take care of them in the infantry. Someone is supposed to take them in the rear, you know. They count the prisoners, supposedly, and I think those prisoners were counted over and over, the same prisoners.

MH: That's how they got counts like 50,000 or 100,000?

JD: That's how they got so many people, because the infantry and the tanks would up there, and they'd take prisoners and send them to the rear. They'd be counted when they got back to the artillery, then counted again when they got back to ordinance, that sort of thing.

MH: I understand.

JD: Yeah, there were people and there were circumstances when guys would be so enraged from having a buddy just killed, and if they had a chance for a prisoner they'd kill him, you know.

MH: And I think what you're saying is, that's just war.

JD: (coughs) You can make—pardon me. You can make all the rules you want, but war is the antithesis of civilization, you know? When it's your life or someone else's, it's an easy choice.

MH: Okay. Anything—I was told that you became a brigadier general?

JD: Excuse me. That was after the war. I stayed in the Reserve, went to the schools and so forth, you know, trained people.

MH: What was your civilian career?

JD: A lawyer.

MH: You're a lawyer?

JD: Yeah.

MH: What kind of law did you practice?

JD: About everything, in my day.

MH: In Madison?

JD: Yes, in Madison.

MH: My wife went to the university there, and I actually spent time there doing—I shot several programs for PBS on the campus there. It's a beautiful place to live.

JD: Yeah, I was on the faculty at the law school for a while.

MH: Ah. Okay. All right, anything else you want to tell me about the—?

JD: I wish I could tell you more about it. I don't recall any write-up in the Division history about it. My recollection is dim, except—I think I'm giving you the right information.

MH: The camp—there were two camps that the 14th Armored is credited with having gotten to before Moosburg. One was called Mühldorf.

JD: What?

MH: Mühldorf, M-u-h-l-d-o-r-f.

JD: That might have been the one.

MH: It was also called Dachau III-B. It was one of the Dachau sub-camps. And I know there were a lot of women working there.

JD: That might have been it.

MH: You don't happen to recall seeing any guys from the 99th Infantry Division there at the same time, did you?

JD: No.

MH: No? Okay. Do you happen to know anybody else who's still with us who was at any of these camps?

JD: Anyone else who was with us?

MH: Who's still alive, who was at any of the camps.

JD: Yeah, my company runner, Bob Straba, S-t-r-a-b-a, would have been with me.

MH: Where could I find him?

JD: He's in—right now I think he may be just finishing attending a reunion. He's up in Michigan, in Kalamazoo. But Bob lives in Albuquerque.

MH: In Albuquerque? All right. I actually sent fliers to that reunion to be distributed, saying I was looking for people. So, maybe he'll even call me when he gets home.

JD: Another would be Leo Gordon.

MH: Leo Gordon?

JD: Leo was my jeep driver. He and I and Straba rode together. I don't know what recollection they'll have of that camp. They may have better recollection of it than I do.

MH: Where does Gordon live?

JD: He lives in Pennsylvania.

MH: Okay.

JD: I'll see if there's some others that I can think of.

MH: Okay. I'm just going to send you an email that'll tell you a little bit about the book, and give you my address or phone number in case you recall somebody else or remember something else.

JD: Well, I think I've got addresses for a number of those people. Hard to keep track of who's alive and who's dead.

MH: I know.

JD: I'm sorry I couldn't get to the reunion this year; that happens. I hope I've been helpful.

MH: You have been, sir, and I thank you very, very much for your time. Okay, bye-bye.

JD: Bye-bye.

End of interview