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Harold "Archie" Dunbar oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, June 18, 2008

Harold Dunbar (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. Why don't you—spell your name for me, please.

Harold Dunbar: I go by Archie, A-r-c-h-i-e.

MH: Okay.

HD: Dunbar, D-u-n-b-a-r.

MH: Okay. What's your real first name?

HD: Harold, H-a-r-o-l-d.

MH: And what's your date of birth, please?

HD: It's December 5, twenty-four [1924].

MH: Okay, making you?

HD: Eighty-three.

MH: Eighty-three. What unit were you in?

HD: 42nd Infantry “Rainbow” Division.

MH: Okay. I think I got your name from Dee Eberhart in the 42nd.¹

HD: Oh, yeah. Okay.

MH: 'Cause I went to the reunion that you had in Mobile [Alabama].

HD: Oh, okay.

MH: Okay. First of all, tell me a little bit about where you grew up and what you did before the army.

HD: I grew up around Desoto [Iowa] here all my life. Let's see, I got out of school in 1942, and then I helped work on a farm for about a year and a half. And then I went into the service in forty-four [1944].

MH: You enlisted or you were drafted?

HD: I think I was drafted, but it might have been enlisted. I can't remember.

MH: So, where did they send you when you first went in?

HD: Camp Fannin, Texas.

¹Dee Eberhart was also interviewed for the Concentration Camp Liberators Oral History Project. The DOI for his interview is C65-00035.

MH: Okay. When did you hook up with the 42nd?

HD: Well, I was in Camp Fannin, Texas four months, and then the Battle of the Bulge was breaking out, so that's all the training I had. They sent me right overseas, and I met up with the Rainbow over there.

MH: So, you were a replacement?

HD: Yes.

MH: Okay. I'm just curious: when you only have four months of training and then they say, "We're sending you to war," you get nervous about that?

HD: Not really. I didn't like Texas; it was hot down there and I was ready to move on. So really, I was glad to move over there, wherever they took us. I done made the wrong move, but there's nothing you could do about it. You went where they sent you.

MH: Right. So, where did you join the 42nd?

HD: Let's see, I laid at Marseilles, France. And then the next morning or the next day, they shipped us on a truck—I'd say about forty miles north of Marseilles—and then I went from there on to the end of the war.

MH: Okay. What company and regiment did they put you in, do you remember?

HD: Yeah, Company L, 232nd [Regiment].

MH: What was your first combat?

HD: Well, just soon as I hit the first—the next day I got over there. Combat all the rest of the way.

MH: Really?

HD: Yeah.

MH: You remember what the first one was like?

HD: I'll tell you what: just damn scared. Twenty-four hours a day that—yeah, you can hardly forget anything. But, no, it was terrible. (laughs) But anyway—

MH: It was cold, too, wasn't it?

HD: It was cold as—I had heard after the war, the weather was the coldest they had over there in fifty years, and then I heard it was also the coldest they ever had over there.

MH: Yeah, pretty much.

HD: The worst thing is, they sent us over there with no overshoes, no gloves, and there we were. Never got back in a house, never had—only had one hot meal all the time we was on the lines there.

MH: For how long?

HD: Four and a half months.

MH: Four and a half months with one hot meal?

HD: Yup.

MH: How did you deal with the cold? How'd you keep from getting frostbitten?

HD: We had two blankets, and that's all. You tried to get next to a buddy come night, and hope you get a buddy, then we'd pull one hour on and one hour off, roughly. We didn't have watches where we could tell when an hour's up or anything.

MH: Right. Were you guys attacked at night?

HD: Oh, yeah, yeah. They'd try to get over to our lines, and we'd try to get back over in their line. They just—we done this road between us there for about two and a half weeks. We're making no headway, so finally they took seventy of us off the front line at midnight. Then they took us back to a little town, Lutzelbourg, and gave us orientation till two o'clock in the morning. Then I was supposed to meet the enemy and see how strong they were. Come two o'clock, they lined us up like a bunch of sheep. We went down a road, and I don't know, it probably wasn't noticed. It was just about the break of day, and I don't know what happened. All hell broke loose. And let's see, there was—I think seventeen of us come back, out of the seventy that went over there on that patrol that morning.

MH: The others were all KIA [killed in action]?

HD: Well, either that or killed. My two buddies—my best foxhole buddy had been with me about two and half weeks; he got killed right within about twelve feet of me. And another one was on down—I don't know how many ahead of us, probably twenty other guys ahead—and then he got killed, too.

MH: This was rifle fire or incoming mortars or artillery?

HD: Snipers.

MH: Snipers.

HD: Yup.

MH: And they just marched you down the road?

HD: Oh, yeah. Had to get over there some way.

MH: So, how does that end?

HD: How'd that end?

MH: Yeah.

HD: My God, I retreated back. I was one of the lucky ones out of that seventy to get back. I took off a firearm, had to run backward—I was trying to fire and keep them away from us and then ran out of ammunition, and I just took off runnin'. Got back to our lines.

MH: What were you shooting, an M1?

HD: M1, yeah.

MH: Yeah. And once you got back to the lines, what happens?

HD: Well, we checked in and let them know we're back, and that's all there was to it.

MH: How do you deal with the guys who had been injured or, you know, who had been hit or been killed?

HD: Well, at the moment, there was no way to get them back.

MH: Huh.

HD: That was March 7 when that was, that patrol was.

MH: That's March 7 of forty-five [1945]?

HD: Yes.

MH: Yeah. And so then what happens?

HD: Well, we pulled back in a little town there; I can't think of the name of the town. We're getting some more recruits up, but we didn't get anymore recruits up; got about four or five truckloads, which didn't amount to thirty or forty to a truckload. And after that, we joined up with, I think, the 7th Army and 7th Division. That's what they called Blood and Guts; I can't think of his name [George S. Patton] right now. And we went on to him the rest of the way. And I got—they gave us—

MH: That was infantry or armor?

HD: It was the infantry.

MH: Okay.

HD: Yeah. I got the Combat Infantry Badge right away when I got hooked up with him.

MH: Were you wounded at all?

HD: No, no. I was very, very fortunate.

MH: So, you hook up with the 7th and then what? Move forward?

HD: Yeah. Well, we went there on up across. We scattered eight miles east and west, headed north up across France, and we went up—I can't remember the name of the town.

MH: So, that battle that you just talked about was in France, not in Germany?

HD: That was in France, yes. And then we crossed over back over into Germany then, and went to Schweinfurt—there was a big ball bearing plant there—and we took that over. We did get a break there. I think we spent two or three days in a German—where the Germans stayed—and got rested up, then we took off. Went south, I think. Würzburg, Nuremberg, and let's see. Then we went into the Dachau prison camp. I think that was on —

MH: Dachau was on April 29.

HD: I was going to say about May 1.

MH: April 29. But back up a little. What's going on just before you got to Dachau?

HD: Just taking one town at a time as we come back south.

MH: It was moving pretty fast by then?

HD: Oh, yeah, we was moving quite fast.

MH: Were you riding in Jeeps and trucks, or were you walking?

HD: Oh, walked all the way.

MH: Really?

HD: Oh, yeah. But then, after Dachau—we didn't stop there, really. I mean, some of that outfit did, and I had an hour. My buddy went in and took some pictures. He wasn't supposed to, but he did.

MH: What did you see at Dachau?

HD: I didn't see nothing. The war was coming to an end, and we pushed on to Munich. And, let's see. As we hit the northwest corner of Munich, the *Bürgermeister*—that was a main guy in town, like a mayor or cop or whatever it was. He met us there and told us that there's about as much underground as there was aboveground in that town, and there could be SS troopers down underground there. So, I took a squad of men—oh, by the way, when we joined the 7th Army, they made me sergeant and wanted me to lead a bunch of men. I said, "Hell, I can't lead myself, let alone somebody else."

Anyway, I took over, and hit Munich then. I took a squad of men and went down underneath in Hitler's beer garden. It was all set up, tables, for a big party that they were planning on having. And anyway, I took—the tables were all set and everything. I hadn't seen any silverware or anything for about four and a half months, and I grabbed up some

of Hitler's napkins and about twenty-one pieces of silverware and stuff, wrapped up and got it home. Wasn't supposed to have that either, but—

MH: Did it have German insignia on it?

HD: Oh, yeah, yeah. AH and all the insignias on the thing. But anyway, the war—we just got in. I think we was in there about two days when the war ended, and then they gave us two days off. On the two days off, we had to either get somebody to wash our clothes, or—we had the same clothes on as what we started out with after the war. Either that, or have some women wash them; or, if they're torn up, well, then they'd get us some new ones. Well, that was kind of the end of the story on that.

And then, they loaded us on trucks after the second day and headed us south, going back to Marseilles or somewhere. We were supposed to go over to end over in Japan. As we get down the road—I'd say about maybe forty miles again—they got word that we didn't have to go to Japan, so they sent us on to Austria for army of occupation down there, and we ended up in Salzburg. There's a prison camp out there, east—I think it was east of Salzburg [in Glaserbach]. I went down there and got some German prisoners and made them make beds and stuff, bunk beds to sleep in for all the prisoners, and stuff.

MH: Did you go into that camp?

HD: Oh, yeah. Yes.

MH: Which camp was that? Do you remember?

HD: I got it in my books. Oh, yeah, Camp Marcus W. Orr.

MH: Marcus W. Orr?

HD: Yeah. O-r-r.

MH: That was a German name or an American name?

HD: No, that's a German name. That was a German prison camp.

MH: Okay. And who was in it?

HD: All German prisoners. They had big towers in the air where we put our boys up there, so if they tried to break through the fences they'd get shot down with machine guns. That worked pretty well. I come home, then, in December, somewhere right after Christmas, I think. That was the end. I never did go back over.

MH: What'd you do when you came home?

HD: I had a TDY [temporary duty assignment], they called it. We were supposed to have ten days after we left Texas; everybody was to have ten days at home before they went overseas. Well, they got iced in down there in Texas and planes couldn't get out, so I only had three days at home and then went right overseas. Anyway, that's how I got to come home early. I was on that to finish my TDY, and then I was supposed to go back over. But something happened; they lost my papers and everything. I didn't go back over. I went down to—after I stayed home, I went on down to Kentucky, a camp down there, and I finished out my time down there. And that's pretty well the end of the thing, as far as I can remember.

MH: Do you know any of the guys that went into Dachau? Are they still around?

HD: No. In fact, I've only got two army buddies left that I knowed. One's in Burlington, Iowa, and he's—let's see, he's eighty-nine now, and he's in a nursing home. And the other one lives in—that one there was Marion Kuntz in Burlington. I nicknamed him "Smokey"; he's always smoking back there then.

MH: And he made it to eighty-nine, huh?

HD: Yes. But he told me here about five years ago, he said, "Archie, I wish I'd have listened to you back there after the war was over there to quit smoking." So, anyways, too late then. Then I had another buddy, Jerry Alver in Wisconsin; he's still living but got the Alzheimer's. But he still knows me and everything. I call him quite often.

MH: Ah, okay. Where is Desoto, Iowa?

HD: About eighteen, twenty miles west of Des Moines, Iowa.

MH: Okay. All right. Well—

HD: Got any other questions?

MH: Nope. I thank you very, very much.

HD: Okay.

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

HD: You betcha.

MH: Okay, take care.

HD: Bye.

MH: Bye-bye.

End of interview