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## Dr. John W. Fague oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, September 5, 2008

John W. Fague (Interviewee)

Michael Hirsh (Interviewer)

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Concentration Camp Liberators Oral History Project  
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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:** Let me just get your basic information. You're John W. Fague, F-a-g-u-e.

**John Fague:** That's right.

MH: You were with Combat Command B of the 11<sup>th</sup> Armored Division, and you got to Mauthausen.

JF: Yes, that's right. I was in Company B of the 21<sup>st</sup> Armored Infantry Battalion, and so on and so forth.

MH: 21<sup>st</sup> Armored Infantry Battalion? When did you go in the service?

JF: When did I go into the service?

MH: Yes.

JF: Nineteen forty-three, in August of forty-three [1943], I think. Yeah.

MH: Were you drafted?

JF: Yes. I tried to enlist in the Navy, but my hearing—they wouldn't take me, and so on and so on. I waited and they drafted me, yes, yes.

MH: So, when did you go overseas to Europe?

JF: Well, I was originally in what they call—did you ever hear of the ASTP [Army Specialized Training Program]?

MH: From a lot of guys, yes.

JF: That's where we were. But we had infantry training; we went right off to infantry training in Camp Roberts, California, from Maryland here, Fort Meade, Maryland, or whatever. And we had infantry training there. Then we went to the college in Puget Sound in Tacoma, Washington, for a semester. And I think that was—I guess, we went up there in about November or something like that, to Tacoma. But I thought that they realized the invasion of Normandy was coming up, and they were going to need infantry troops, troops to follow up on that. So, engineers a couple years later. So they sent us down to Camp Cooke, California, to the 11<sup>th</sup> Armored Division, and they just divided us up into all the three infantry battalions that were in the Armored Division. I always said they wanted to improve the IQ of the squads and so on and so forth. (laughs)

MH: There is some truth in that, you know.

JF: What?

MH: I said there is some truth in that.

JF: Yeah, because they were nice guys, but a lot of hillbillies, you know. I don't mean—they were good guys, but it seems like they wanted to increase the IQ of the squads. But anyhow—

MH: I forgot to ask you, what's your date of birth?

JF: Date of birth, 4-4-25 [April 4, 1925].

MH: Okay, which makes you how old today?

**Unidentified Woman:** Eighty-three.

JF: Oh, they were getting ready to go overseas. That would have been—let me see, let me get this straight. That would have been in the spring; oh, no, that's in about September of forty-four [1944], September of forty-four [1944]. We were getting ready to go overseas, and they'd come off of maneuvers. So, anyhow, we joined them and they divided us, sprinkled us all through the three battalions. And then we went overseas in about October, I guess, to England, the south—southern England, the plains or something. I forget what they called it. We were there a couple of months and so on, until December, and December 15 I crossed the Channel with my half-track. The driver had—I didn't drive, the driver and I. And the sixteenth, the rest of the troops came over on a ferry boat.

MH: Were your vehicles already waiting for you?

JF: What?

MH: Were your vehicles waiting for you already?

JF: Well, we come on a landing craft. We took the half-track. I don't know, I guess it's Southampton or whatever. We got our half-track and we went on an LST [Landing Ship, Tank] over to Le Havre. I think it was Le Havre, yeah. So, we had it right with us. I was—the driver and I, we stayed right there. It was in the mud and so on for a little bit. We were supposed to go down to some base in southern France. There was a submarine base still held by the Germans. I never could figure that out, but they had this submarine base, and we were supposed to get training around there, do something, I don't know.

But of course, as you know, Hitler invaded Belgium on the sixteenth, the day that the troops came across. After the high command finally realized this was the real invasion and so on, we got orders to go north to the Meuse—let me see, I forget—to Moselle or some river, to go north right away to stop the Germans; unbeknown to me, of course. I didn't know anything; I just learned it later. [Dwight D.] Eisenhower or—whatever the other one was, I forget his name—they got [George S.] Patton to come and help out, and they gave him three divisions. He said he needed divisions, and they gave him our

division and the 87<sup>th</sup>, and I forget what the other one was. They were assigned to him and so on, so we became part of Patton's 3<sup>rd</sup> Army.

I think we went north. We just went night and day north to Belgium. I knew we passed through Paris; I could see the Eiffel Tower, so I knew it was Paris. The people were cheering along the streets. They were cheering and throwing kisses. I thought, "Oh, my God, we didn't do a damn thing yet, what's this all about?" Of course, I had no knowledge. 'Course, they wanted as many Americans as possible between them and the Germans; they just got rid of the Germans and they didn't need them again. So we went.

I think we spent Christmas Eve at Soissons, which was a French garrison, had been. And on Christmas Day, we had dinner in the field and proceeded north. I can't say it was the Meuse River they wanted to hold them at, but anyhow, we crossed that, into Belgium. And, let's see. Well, on the twenty-ninth, I think we got our first engagement on the twenty-ninth of December. We were on the southern flank. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Army was tracking north, and the 1<sup>st</sup> Army was coming down from the north, and we were going up from the south, I guess.

So, I had a book put out that I wrote. As soon as the war was over, my captain, my good captain, gave me a pass to Nice, France, and when I got down there, I wrote everything that had happened. Of course, during the war you couldn't write anything. My father was a captain in World War I, and I knew he'd be interested, so I wrote down—I started right back when we left the States, and I recorded everything while it was fresh in my memory. And part of that has been published recently; it's just been published. Our historical society, one of the professors here found out what I'd written and so he had the historical society publish that. And that just came out. But that dealt with the Battle of the Bulge, and so on and so forth.

MH: At what point did you know anything about concentration camps?

JF: Well, I didn't know anything about them at all. But sometime, I guess while we were still in Germany—I guess, in April or somewhere in there—we would come across hundreds of these inmates and so on, on the road. And I don't know which way they were—they were trying to get away from the Russians, I thought, but I just read lately they wanted to get away from the Americans or something. They had all these inmates on the road; they were in their pajama pants, I call them, striped pants, you know. It just seems like there was hundreds of them on the road. Some of them would get down on their knees and thank us, but of course we couldn't do anything for them, because we weren't equipped for that. And I always remember my dear captain; he was chasing one of the guards down through the field and swinging his carbine.

Anyhow, that's the first. A couple different days, we'd run into all these inmates or whatever on the road. And of course, I didn't know. I just assumed that's what they were from some kind of a camp; but then that was the end of that. We just had to slowly move through them and keep going and so forth.

MH: How many did you see? For example, was it—?

JF: How many what?

MH: How many were there, like, dozens or hundreds?

JF: Oh, it seemed like there was a hundred or more each time, a hundred or more. A great mass, it could have been a hundred or more each time. Seemed like an awful lot of men.

MH: Was it clear where they were trying to go, or they didn't know?

JF: Where they what?

MH: Do you think they knew where they were trying to go, or they were just trying to get away from the Germans?

JF: Well, I think the Germans were driving—were trying to get—were taking them somewhere, you know, driving them. And of course, when we came, the guards left, flew. And so forth. But—

MH: Did you guys ever shoot the guards?

JF: What?

MH: Did you guys ever have occasion to shoot the guards?

JF: Did we have occasion to—oh, no, I didn't. All I remember is the captain chasing this one down through the field; why he didn't shoot him, I don't know. But that was the

captain; he was a good guy. I just remember him chasing and swinging his carbine at the guy, that's all I remember. But they were taking them somewhere—you know, I thought to get away from the Russians.

MH: Well, they were moving them—they were moving them from one camp to another because they wanted to keep killing them, I guess.

JF: Something—I don't know what. Like I say, some got down on their knees and thanked us, but we just couldn't do anything with them. We didn't have any positions, we had to keep moving. So we slowly moved through them. But there must have been a couple hundred at a time. And I think it happened at least twice; we ran into two groups. But it just seemed like a mob of them, I don't know. Anyhow, so—but then, as I said in the letter, of course I had no idea what was going on or anything. I didn't learn this afterwards. But I have it in my notes; I should go see and see if I can find my autobiography—but I knew, on the fifth of May, we went into this in my—somebody said, one place I read the fourth of May and somebody said the sixth of May, but—

MH: The official list says the 11<sup>th</sup> Armored got to Gusen and into Mauthausen on May 5.

JF: On May 5, that was my understanding, too. I knew the war ended on the eighth, three days later. But so, we—I didn't know exactly where we were going or what we were doing. Have you ever been to Mauthausen?

MH: No. I've been to Auschwitz; I've never been to Mauthausen.

JF: Well, it's a gorgeous, you might say a gorgeous such a thing—it's the stone work, granite or what they took out of this mine and so forth. It's beautiful: on top of the hill, looks like a fort or fortress. We went through this massive gate, and of course the people just—oh, they were just pitiful. They were skin and bones, and the women had long coats or something on because I guess they were ashamed at how they looked. And they were so glad to see us, and so forth.

MH: Did you get out of your vehicle?

JF: I can't remember—I don't think so, no. I didn't get out of the vehicle. But I remember reading afterwards—I have it, who it was. A very famous Nazi hunter; what was his name?

MH: Simon Wiesenthal?

JF: Yeah, I heard—this is what I heard: he wanted to touch the star, the white star on the American tank. They had to carry him out to do that. But anyhow, we were there for three weeks. The odor there was horrible, you know.

MH: Tell me what you saw when you first pulled into the camp.

JF: Well, just saw these women, I guess, men—and they were just milling around and so forth. Of course, they were the ones that were left. The other ones were dead and gone. Well, they hadn't been buried, I guess, and we had to bury them. I didn't participate in that. But people were just, these were women—I remember seeing the women—but men I guess, too, and just skin and bones. Of course, I say they had these long coats on so you couldn't see how skinny they were and so forth.

MH: Did they come up to you and try and touch you?

JF: Well, they come around. They were just so happy. And they kind of admired the boys and so on and so forth. They were just so happy to see us, but—

MH: How many guys went in with you?

JF: Well, we were in a half—I guess the whole company. We were, I just remember—I never dismounted, we never got out of the half-track that I know of, so our whole company—that's 250 men, something like that. And how many half-tracks, each squad had a half-track, of course, and we just drove in there, I don't know—we were assigned as a guard. I was a squad leader, the first squad, the first platoon. We were assigned as guards, I was told to maintain order in there. That's all—we lived in some, well stayed in some nice houses that the SS officers had away from the camp, and of course there was nothing left there except the houses, no furniture or anything. So, it didn't matter; it was May and it didn't matter. But we would go and pull guard duty and I'd patrol around the camp to see that guards didn't come, nothing going on. That's about the main thing.

I recall—it was my understanding that the cremation thing had broken down and there were all these bodies. I didn't help, but I know some of my squad went and got the civilians in the town to come and help bury them with bulldozers. I have pictures of that. I had a number of pictures in the camp, and unfortunately some of them got away, some

of the pictures. But I still have a couple of pictures. I picked up a camera—I liberated a camera on the way through Germany, and I still have it. And then I'd start to take some pictures.

MH: What kind of camera was it?

JF: Well, it wasn't any high-priced. It's one you look in the top, you know. But it wasn't any—but it did a nice job. But it wasn't any expensive. But I got a nice leather case made in Austria for a pack of cigarettes or two, but I just liberated it. And so I could take some pictures. But one case in particular, in one of the newsletters in our division paper, somebody requested—somebody said they'd took a picture of his picture, and he would like that picture. And I figured from his description that I was the one who took the picture of him. So unfortunately I sent him the picture without making a copy of it back then; I didn't know anything about making copies. It was after the war was over. And I knew right away that I was the one who took the picture, but I have—I was just loafing around, the inmates, the poor inmates.

MH: How did it make you feel being around those people?

JF: Well, I tell you what, I was so euphoric about the war being over and the fact that no more fighting, I'd be going home. I was kind of up on a cloud somewhere. So, I really didn't see too much of it. I don't know where—somebody came and took care of them, I guess. I mean, there was some around there; but aside from that first day we went in—the odor lingered there, the whole time, but, of course, I thought it was terrible. It was a wonderful way to end the war to know why you lost your buddies, friends. It was worth fighting for when you saw what was going on.

I didn't realize—all I knew was Mauthausen, but then I learned later there was about 100 camps. I was just kind of euphoric, and I just—I didn't see too much suffering. They were either dead or—and we were just the guard. I mean, the first day going through there, it was pitiful to see these people, but that's about all I can remember that first day. Afterwards, I just patrolled around to see that there was no fighting or anything and so forth.

MH: Were you there when the Americans came and started giving them food and medical care and that sort of thing?

JF: No, I didn't see anything of that. I didn't know anything about that, or food or who took care of them. I didn't see anything of that. I just don't know what went on.

Somebody must have come and taken care of them, but I didn't participate in that. I was just to the guard, assigned to the guards. Someone in my squad, one in particular, I remember he was down to get the local people to help bury the dead, and I have pictures of that, the bodies and whatever. I took the picture, or where I got the pictures, I don't know.

MH: Did seeing—who did you tell about Mauthausen when you came home?

JF: Well, I wrote it—like I say, I wrote it to my father. I wrote everything about it to him, and so forth. And so, I don't know. I didn't tell anybody too much. People didn't want to hear about that, and I didn't want to tell 'em, or I was just so happy to be home. But I wrote the details. And I guess if I looked that up, there might be a little more in there, and I could maybe send you—

MH: That'd be great.

JF: I can make copies of that. I'm sure I have the thing that you—

MH: I'll send you an e-mail—actually, I did send you an e-mail that has my address in it.

JF: Yeah, well, I didn't get your email; did you send it to me?

MH: I sent it this evening. I only sent it about an hour ago.

JF: Well, I've been away, and I just got home.

MH: Okay. What photos do you think you still have?

JF: Well, not the only thing—it's a couple of these people lingering around that are really not, there are pictures of the dead that they're burying and so forth.

MH: Do you have a picture of yourself?

JF: Oh, yeah. Well, yeah, this book that just came out, that was published. I'm on the front page in the half-track. You just see a young nineteen-year-old kid in front of the half-track. What's on the back is a picture of me recently marching in the parade, and so forth.

MH: Is it possible to get copies of those two pictures, and then I'll scan them and send them back to you?

JF: Yeah, I can make copies of the few that I have. I could send you—this book I have is about the Battle of the Bulge. But I came back. I got out of there in maybe February, and I went back to Penn State. I'd already had one year at Penn State, and I went to Penn State and took up veterinary medicine then, and I went to University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia for four years to become a veterinarian. That was my profession and so forth, which I—

MH: So, it's Dr. Fague?

JF: What'd you say?

MH: So, it's doctor?

JF: Yeah, that's right. I was a veterinarian for quite a few years, and I sold my business to somebody else.

MH: How long ago did you retire as a vet?

JF: Well, I've been retired maybe fifteen, twenty years, I guess. I'm eighty-three years old. I write for the newspaper every week. I've been writing for the newspaper. I have two books that I've published of things that I've written for the local paper—my daughter published them—plus this recent one about the Battle of the Bulge.

MH: How do you think being at Mauthausen affected your life?

JF: Well, it gave me a bad—what Hitler and his Nazi group could do to, how they could do that to those people, it just—what a rotten lousy bunch the Nazis were. And, like I said, it made you realize why that war had to be fought, as opposed to some of these other

wars. It's justified. That was the main thing that came to my mind, that it justified why we were there. It's a fitting way to end the war, because you knew that it wasn't for nothing.

MH: Were you wounded at all over there?

JF: What?

MH: Were you wounded over there?

JF: No, no. I was very lucky. They were killed right close to me, killed right beside me, but I was a lucky one. That was part of my theme in my autobiography. All my life I was lucky, everything I did, not because I was bright or smart or good-looking. I was just lucky everything turned out right for me. The other ones that got killed beside me, or something, but I survived by good fortune.

MH: Have you had any occasion to meet people who survived Mauthausen?

JF: What did you say, sir?

MH: Have you had any occasion to meet people who were, you know, prisoners at Mauthausen?

JF: No, no. I have had no contact, like I say. This one fella who had a note, had a message in a division paper, and I realized that I was the one and I just sent him that picture. That's the only—I didn't know who he was or when it was or whatever. I just sent him a picture because it sounded like that somebody took his picture. But I have no contact. Have you—I tell you what. I'm trying to think, have you read that girl's writing? I can't say her name. She's written several about Mauthausen, really good, I thought. Fictitious. I could go and get her name.

MH: I think I know the book you mean.

JF: She sent me two of them. One of them was this—

MH: *From Dust and Ashes?*

JF: What?

MH: Tricia Goyer, *From Dust and Ashes?*

JF: Yes, yes, yes.

MH: I've got it here.

JF: One of her books, I was reading it and I thought, "Oh, my God, that's me." She interviewed us, of course, she took my (inaudible) was in 81<sup>st</sup>, or the medical thing, and so on. But she just took right the day before we attacked, that page there, I said, "Oh, my God, that's familiar. I wrote that." But, yeah, apparently she interviewed a lot of the people over there, and I thought those books were pretty good. I really don't have too much otherwise.

*End of interview*