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Bob Fasnacht oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, August 20, 2008

Bob Fasnacht (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: First of all, give me your name and spell it for me, please.

Bob Fasnacht: Bob Fasnacht, F-a-s-n-a-c-h-t.

MH: And your address?

BF: Twenty-five—oh shh. I told you I'm not thinking well today

MH: I'm trying to figure out what I did with my notebook.

BF: Thirty-five, twenty-five—there's everything on there.

MH: Okay, his address is...phone number is...and email is...

BF: You got it.

MH: And your date of birth?

BF: March 19, 1926.

MH: Where were you before you went in the Army?

BF: Oh, I was in high school and then the Army—I enlisted in the Army when I was sixteen, and they sent me to college—I'm sorry, when I was seventeen. They sent me to college until I was eighteen, and then I went to basic training, infantry training basic at Camp Robinson, Arkansas. Then from there, I joined the 70th [Infantry] Division and went overseas with the 70th, and we went across Alsace-Lorraine [France] with the 70th Division, doing practically nothing except riding boxcars. And the Bulge came, the Battle of the Bulge started, and they pulled fifteen of the least desirable men out of each company and transferred us to the 80th Division, and naturally I was one of them.

They loaded us on trucks in the middle of the afternoon, and we took over—never stopped until we arrived in Luxembourg the next morning about ten o'clock, unloaded. A non-com [non-commissioned officer], who incidentally is here today, said, "You guys follow me." And we followed him up over, maybe half a mile over the front edge of a mountain, and he said, "Dig in here." And I said, "What's that racket I hear over on the other side of the valley?" He says, "Those are Tiger tanks." I said, "What are they doing?" He said, "We don't know what they're doing." Well, naturally, I dug awfully fast. That was my introduction to combat in the 3rd Army.

MH: So you fought through the Battle of the Bulge?

BF: Yes.

MH: Came out unscathed?

BF: Unscathed, yeah. And well, I won't say that—let's see, in January when we started the offensive across the Ourthe and Sauer Rivers, after the Bulge, I was in the first boat that hit the shore. The current was so swift that I jumped out into the water, thinking it was about knee-deep, to hold the boat, and it was about here deep—

MH: To your nose.

BF: Yeah. Anyway, I got soaked there, and I got up on shore and held the boat until the rest of the guys got out and ran down the beach there and got some cover. I never did get to change my shoes or socks for about four or five days, so I had a couple of frozen toes. So I was hospitalized for about three, three and a half weeks for that, and I went back to the outfit again.

MH: At that point what did you know about Nazi death camps, the Holocaust?

BF: Oh, nothing. Absolutely nothing.

MH: Zero.

BF: Zero. That was a real shock. I can't tell you what camp we came into, but I didn't take any pictures there. But that was an absolute shock.

MH: What day do you think you came into the first camp?

BF: Oh, that was in March, April, maybe.

MH: It's unlikely that it was before April 3.

BF: Yeah, it was pretty far into Germany before we actually saw anything like that.

MH: What did it look like?

BF: Well, they had these very crude barracks, and of course these people were all free, but what we found was that sort of thing. However, at that time we turned directly south and went down into Austria. And this was taken in a camp, Ebensee.

MH: So, tell me about finding Ebensee.

BF: By this time I had looted enough cameras—acquired enough cameras that I was developing pictures for the company officers. They thought that was pretty nice, so they

gave me a Mickey Mouse job in the office instead of standing guard and that sort of thing.

MH: How were you developing stuff? Where did you get the chemicals—?

BF: Oh, any black cols—oh, you'd find them everywhere: in a factory in Nuremburg, for example. And that's what I done before I went in the Army.

MH: So, you're doing rolls and stuff like that?

BF: Exactly, in the dark. And—

MH: But how'd you even know what kind of film's in the camera you're getting?

BF: Oh, all film develops the same. I mean, I won't say it was a great job, but that gave me some clout and notice from the company officers, and they kinda liked having me around to develop their pictures. So, whenever I asked for permission to go someplace to take some pictures or something, it was okay.

MH: How were you printing the pictures?

BF: Oh, usually contact; couldn't enlarge them. So any piece of glass light, you can make contact prints.

MH: And you found paper?

BF: Yeah. Oh, in the factory in Nuremberg, I'd looted a whole bunch of stuff and gave it to the supply sergeant, and he hauled it around for me. But—

MH: So, you'd make a darkroom out of something and—

BF: Yeah, any closet you can tape—put stuffing around the closet and it'd work out all right. And it doesn't matter when the film is panchromatic or ortho [orthochromatic], I

didn't use a safelight anyhow. But the printing papers, of course, you rig up a red light of some sort to work in. And it was pretty crude. But it satisfied everybody at the time.

MH: So, tell me about Ebensee. How did you find it? What did you see?

BF: I'd heard about it. I can't tell you how. And I hitchhiked. I literally hitchhiked with some Army units that were moving down toward that way. The first thing I saw was—one of the first things was that. They were burying—the first GIs in there gave the guards back to the inmates, and that's one of the guards. I tell you, you couldn't tell if he was male or female, they worked him over. And that was—well, you can see everybody's taking a picture of him laying there. And the inmates had prompted his arm up into a Nazi salute. (laughs)

MH: That's the first thing you saw?

BF: Well, of the camps, yeah. The first hint of it, we opened some camps and saw how these people were starved, and that was up in northern—straight across from Luxembourg in Germany. I can't tell you where or anything. Those towns don't have much names, you know, a heck of a lot.

MH: These were small camps.

BF: I assume so. And factories, big, big buildings would have guys in striped uniforms working in there. So, they weren't all slave—they were slave laborers, but they weren't all being worked to death or anything. The Nazis weren't that dumb. Generally speaking, it was Jews who were the ones who were destined to be killed, Jewish women and children first of all. But—

MH: So, to come back to Ebensee, you got into the camp and just take me through the camp.

BF: Well, I didn't inspect it a whole lot. And it's been sixty years, so I've forgotten a lot. There were several buildings there, and at Ebensee it was a mine. They were mining something with slave labor on it. And I went back maybe fifty yards into this mine; I can't really tell you what it was. Whether it was—who knows, gold or coal or something. I can't tell you. I don't think it was coal. But anyway, these people were working about twelve or about fourteen hours a day, chopping rocks and that sort of thing, in this monstrous cave. I didn't like being in there, so I got out of there as soon as I could. It's

funny; even then you didn't realize the enormity of this, that humans could do this to humans.

MH: On a small scale or on a grand scale?

BF: On such a big scale that—and I've often wondered if [Adolf] Hitler knew the scale of this sort of thing.

MH: He must have had the numbers.

BF: I suppose, but God, how could he be so dumb to do this? If he hadn't picked on the Jews, the Nazis would still be running Germany. I mean, they could have negotiated a settlement of some sort, but that thing of picking, trying to destroy the Jews.

MH: And a lot of other folks that he didn't like.

BF: Oh, yeah, but those were real minorities. Actually, they talk about anti-church and that kind of thing; the churches didn't do too badly. Roman Catholic Church certainly survived well under Hitler.

MH: There was some cooperation going on.

BF: Exactly. And I would assume that the Methodists and everybody else did the same thing, at least accommodated to stay alive.

MH: But there were also several thousand priests that were executed.

BF: Yeah. Now, whether they resisted or lipped off or just a general part of the thing, I don't know. What brings about your interest in this?

MH: I write books.

BF: Is that right?

MH: And I was talking to—I had written a blurb for a Vietnam book that my previous editor had done, and I said, you know, “I’m looking for something to write.” And he said, “Look at World War II.” And it took me about three minutes to say that I’m interested in tracking down the guys that liberated the camps and talk about what they did then and how it’s effected their lives.

BF: Oh.

MH: I’m—I mean, I’m Jewish—

BF: I went to Cleveland to one of the synagogues up there, had a—talked about the liberation, and I got invited to go to that. This young fellow—I say young; he was maybe ten years younger than me—was ushering me to my seat down front in this little auditorium, little synagogue. He said, “Where were you?” I said, “Well, at Ebensee.” And he said, “Can I hug you?” and I said, “Why?” And he said, “I was there when you came.” You see, I get a little worked up over that. Every time I try to tell that, I feel the same way. What a coincidence, but it’s difficult to understand the enormity of those camps.

MH: How big was Ebensee?

BF: It’s tough for me to say, but certainly I could say a mile square or something like that.

MH: When you got there, the gates were—the GIs were already in there.

BF: Yes, yeah.

MH: How long had they been there, do you think?

BF: Just hours.

MH: I’m sure curious—you know that the GIs had actually turned the guy over to the inmates?

BF: No, no, I don’t know. I just happened on to that situation.

MH: What else did you see there?

BF: Not a heck of a lot. I remember going into this sort of a mine where they were working, and seeing these men that were just skin and bones, and they were still alive. And of course, you're young and that sort of thing, you tended to not want to touch them or talk to them or anything else. And I don't speak—the German I had then was pretty miniscule. And most of them were not Germans. They may have spoke some German, but they weren't—they were other nationalities. So, there was almost no communication between me and them.

MH: Was it just men there, or was there women, too?

BF: I didn't see any women. I would assume there were. Right after the war, I (inaudible)—somebody was publishing this, and I was the photographer for it and whether I have much stuff in this, or not. I may have put some things in here that other guys wrote.

MH: Careful with that stuff.

BF: Yeah, I can't get any more. (inaudible)

MH: *The Hamper News*?

BF: Yeah.

MH: Hamper comes from—?

BF: "Hamper" was the code word for the regiment. In other words, if you were the regimental commander, you were Hamper One. You didn't say Colonel [James] Lockett or anything like that. And Hamper D would be the headquarters of Company D in that regiment. Don't think I've got anything in here that amounts to anything. This is about it. Feel free.

MH: How long did you stay in the camp?

BF: Oh, very little. I was in that general area just two or three days. I can't really tell you. I get a little confused on some trips we've been. Went back, tried to find it once but didn't see much, although you can go and visit the camp now. Maybe you have, I don't know.

MH: No.

BF: You can go and visit; they've just it up as kind of a museum there. But—

MH: What did seeing a place like that do to you, personally? How did it affect your life?

BF: I don't know. I don't think that made me hate the Nazis or anything like that, particularly. I always kinda felt that Germans are here, and the people who are doing this are over here. I didn't—but with a name like Fasnacht, I tend to be a little prejudiced that way, but I never felt like that the entire race was responsible for those things. I'm not sure who was.

MH: But just years later, having seen the kinds of things you saw, can you detect an impact on you? Did it change you as a person?

BF: Oh, yeah. You suddenly realize what humans can do to other humans. And it's—

MH: But that doesn't hit you as an eighteen-year-old kid, does it?

BF: Not particularly, no. In retrospect at this age, I wonder how anybody can do that. You know, I'm sensitive, or whatever word we want. I can't imagine how anybody can rape a woman; I mean forceful, brutal rape. I mean, sex is great, but I can't imagine satisfying yourself that way, nor can I imagine killing somebody for the fun of it.

MH: Which the Nazis did plenty of.

BF: Yes.

MH: The part that, as I've been researching this book, that one of the things I'm struggling with is the fact that as the war was winding, down and the Nazis knew they had lost, they still gave the orders to kill as many people—

BF: I know.

MH: —to march the people out of the camps, to not let the Allies recover any of the prisoners. At the first camp, at Ohrdruf, the last thing, they lined a bunch of people up in a circle, and the last guys went out the door just went boom-boom-boom-boom-boom-boom with their pistols. I don't understand that.

BF: I can't either. Whether the SS—now in my opinion, I'm stating this as fact and it may not be fact—there were at least two kinds of SS. There was the Waffen-SS that were the Marine Corps—they were the Marines, the topnotch soldiers. Then there were the Death's Head SS, and these were the baddies.

MH: Right.

BF: And most of the camps, I think, were headed by the Death's Head SS. I'm glad you agree with that distinction. I haven't seen that in print, but that's what I've always sensed. That originally the Waffen-SS were the elite soldiers. But that's been aborted.

(to unidentified woman) Hi.

Unidentified Woman: Somebody recommended the Middlesex Diner, which you go right out front and across the road.

BF: Fine with me.

Unidentified Woman: We're meeting at the bar around 6:00, but we won't be back quite at 6:00.

BF: All right.

Unidentified Woman: If you want to do that?

BF: That will be fine. You didn't tell my wife, did you?

Unidentified Woman: I haven't seen her.

BF: Oh, okay.

Unidentified Woman: I didn't tell any body else. I only told you, and I only told you.

MH: Okay.

BF: Okay, tell me again, so—

MH: I got it for you the Middlesex Diner.

Unidentified Man: Pretend it's over sex.

MH: The over sex diner, right. (laughs)

BF: He'll remember it I wont.

Unidentified Woman: But it's across—I don't know

pause in recording

BF: Thanks.

MH: Were you a religious person before the war?

BF: Oh, yeah, I grew up in Sunday school and all that sort of thing. Religious, I'm not so sure, but I—we grew up in that atmosphere.

MH: Did seeing what you saw in the war change anything?

BF: No I don't think so.

MH: You didn't question belief in God, nothing like that.

BF: No. No, I figured those are the baddies, and they're not doing what they're supposed to do. Same as you look at a kid misbehaving in school when you're in school. I'm not going to do it, but I'll be friends with him even if he does.

MH: You've talked to school groups?

BF: No, I haven't. Maybe one group of my grandkids, that's all.

MH: When's the first time you told people back in the world about what you had seen?

BF: I don't think I really talked much about that until maybe ten or fifteen years after the war, and people like you started inquiring or heard these things and started inquiring. Now, the pictures I'd taken, that sort of thing that I've got around here, I've showed those to people and everything, but they don't believe it.

MH: Even when they look at the pictures.

BF: I don't think they believe it. The enormity of that horror, I don't think—I'm not sure I can, and the length of time it went on. And nobody did anything about it. And you can't tell me that American intelligence wasn't knowing what's going on there.

MH They knew.

BF: And they—I almost have a feeling that the Western world's attitude was, "Well, they're killing Jews—who cares?" Maybe I'm cynical.

MH: No, I think you're probably accurate. There was some of that going on in the United States. They certainly didn't change the immigration laws to get Jews escape it.

BF: No. You say you're Jewish?

MH: Yeah.

BF: I've grown up around—I had a graphic arts business, made printing plates and that sort of thing, and the local Jewish center had their own printing department. And I got to know those people pretty well, so we were among the few gentiles that belonged to this local Jewish center, and we enjoyed them very much. And as it developed, one of the best friends we developed out of that, a Jewish fella—oh, hell, I was best man or usher at his daughter's wedding and everything else. We were very, very close. The subject of faith never came up; it wasn't necessary. So, we went to an awful lot of Jewish affairs, and brought him to United Brethren affairs, too. Unfortunately, he died quite young. And you know, that really—I was a pallbearer. I think I was probably the only gentile pallbearer that church ever had. But it really got me. He was a very close friend. Started out as a customer, but somehow our families got together and everything else.

MH: Did you ever run into that man from Ebensee again?

BF: No. No, I haven't.

MH: That had to be one incredible moment.

BF: Yeah, I think so. These things are getting further way out, and I'm glad you're doing things like this, even if I forget a lot of stuff.

MH: It's okay. When did you get out of the service?

BF: Well, I had some intention of staying in, so while the war was on, in order to get out of combat, I applied for OCS [Officer Candidate School], and didn't get accepted until after the war was over. By this time, I was running this newspaper and stuff, and Colonel Luckett, the regimental commander, called me one day. I always had to take the proof of this to him to okay it. Called me in and says, "I see you've applied for OCS." I said, "Yes, sir." He says, "Well, a lot of people have applied; I'm kind of screening the people at regimental level so we don't have too many candidates." He asked me a few things like

what color is the tip of a .50 caliber incendiary bullet and that sort of thing. And he handed me a whole bunch of questions like that printed, and said, “You ought to go over these things.” The next day, he went on leave to Switzerland.

The next day, I’m called to go before the divisional OCS board. And I go in this room, and I thought, “There’s about fifty guys all with rank all up and down their sleeves, and I’m a PFC [private first class].” I thought—this guy, this captain, comes out and says, “You’ll be called alphabetically by grade”—and I thought, oh, shit, it’ll be tomorrow afternoon before I hear from ’em—“with one exception.” I’m the first guy in.

I go in, and I report to the senior officer, and here sits two lieutenant colonels. So, I kinda saluted in between ’em; one of ’em returned it. The first thing he says is, “You’re from Canton, Ohio.” I says, “Yes, sir.” He says, “Ever been down on Cherry Avenue?” Well, Cherry Avenue was a whorehouse district in Canton, Ohio. And I assured him that I wasn’t. (laughs) He and I were the only ones who really knew the meaning of that question. But they asked me a few non-committal questions—why did I want to stay in the Army, and that sort of thing. And, “That’ll be all.” I saluted and left.

About six weeks later, I get orders to report to Fort Benning, Georgia, Officer Candidate School. I was the only combat veteran in the whole company; I was sort of King Shit. Everybody else was just out of basic training. Nobody bothered me much. The officers didn’t harass me or anything else. And it was obvious by then I was going to marry the girl I was going to marry. It was also obvious to me she would not fit into the military. So, I decided to get out. Plus, Walter Winchell—remember him?—was predicting—

MH: Not only do I remember him, I’ve met him.

BF: Is that right?

MH: I’ll tell you my Walter Winchell story later.

BF: He was predicting war with Russia by April, and that was February.

MH: Second lieutenants—survival rate, not good.

BF: Exactly. And that was precisely the thought I had, that second lieutenants—the casualty rate’s pretty high, and the thought of—frankly, the thought of leading—I had

such good company officers. I mean, these guys were real men. I had the highest respect for them. And I wasn't sure at that point if I could come up to that image that I had for a platoon leader. Plus, you know, the idea of going into combat, or having to go into combat that soon and that sort of thing, and I wanted to get married and everything else. So, I decided to resign. And I have never been chewed out by anybody like I was chewed out by a full colonel when I resigned.

MH: You're wasting their time—

BF: For wasting their time and money and everything else. And he was absolutely right. Anyway, I got out and got myself a job and one thing led to the other. But I have no regrets, but I still think I could have been a dang good officer. I think—think when the colonel was chewing me out; the experience I could have brought to enlisted men would have been great. But that's gone, and I'm not sorry.

When I was about thirty-eight or so, I commented to my wife that, "If I'd stayed in the military, you know, I'd be retiring now." She said, "What would you be making?" And I forget what the figures were at the time, and her comment was, "You'd have had to be a three-star general to make what you're making." So, maybe it's just as well I didn't go into the military.

End of interview