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# Hugh F. Foster III oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, August 20, 2008

Hugh F. Foster III (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:** We're talking to Lt. Col. Hugh—middle initial?

**Hugh F. Foster III:** F.

MH: Hugh F. Foster III. And your date of birth?

HF: 3 March 1947. That's a whole different century.

MH: Yes. Okay. We had had this conversation about units that would go driving past the concentration camp and essentially wave as they went by. And, being the basic civilian that I am and knee-jerk liberal and whatever, I don't understand that. You very succinctly explained it.

HF: Yeah. When you're on the offense, there are a number of categories of the offense, the ultimate objective being an exploitation. An exploitation is when you've got the enemy completely on the ropes, he has no chance of making any effort at good resistance or defense, and you can basically run him to the ground. You don't always get there, although that's usually the intention, and it is something that is done at a very high level: not at platoon level or company level, but an army.

So, you have the first category of an offense, the deliberate attack. The aim of that attack is create a penetration of the enemy lines, be it direct or indirect. You might pin them in one place and come around in Area B or something. But once you've got a penetration and you've gotten through the lines, you don't want to just stop and then start taking on the enemy in order to just kill a bunch of enemy guys. You want to continue the confusion of the hierarchy by keeping on and go. So, you've got a penetration and you want to push this guy so that he is reacting totally to you, is backing up as fast as he can while trying to stay in a cohesive defense, so that he can slow you down until such time as his own forces there or reserve forces can effect a cohesive defensive position, and then they can resist your attack some more. And your effort is to not let that happen.

Once you've gotten to the point where you have conducted an attack, you've penetrated the enemy's lines, and you're in pursuit, you're pushing him ahead of you, and you're bypassing isolated pockets that really are immaterial to your mission of keep on going—other guys will take care of those fellows—once you get this guy where he is completely reeling and he's abandoning equipment—he's just trying to get the hell out of there to get as much space between you and he as possible in hopes of getting some kind of a strategic level defense going—then you're in what's called an exploitation. And you are just moving, no one's resisting you, they don't have time to resist, you're overrunning his supplies, you're overrunning his medical positions. Small pockets of guys are just surrendering; other pockets are developing themselves into little defensive positions. In essence, you are having your way with the enemy guy. And, hopefully, the exploitation will then lead to a total collapse and the end.

What we had at the end of World War II was exploitation. When we crossed the Rhine River in the south, 7<sup>th</sup> Army guys, that was a penetration and we were in the pursuit. We punched through the Siegfried Line, which happened on 15 March [1945], and just was a footrace to the Rhine River. Germans were just trying to get out of the way, moving right and left and trying to get back over that river. And we hit the river, and basically the term I use is “bounce the river:” you just took it in stride. There wasn't a need for a deeply opposed assault crossing; the Germans were just in complete disorder. And we just kept pushing 'em.

And about the time that Nuremburg fell, it changed into the exploitation, where there was just no coherence left at all to the German forces; they were just milling around at a strategic level. There was nothing they could do to stop us. They tried—some small units tried to stand, but it wasn't keeping us up.

MH: So, when you hear that an armored unit, and I forget which one at this point, literally just rolled past the concentration camp—

HF: Oh, yeah. They would be told, “Your mission is to get to Point A or to occupy Point B,” and in fact, Dachau was one of those events. The plan was that whatever unit encountered the concentration camp, and it was not known specifically where that camp was other than in the vicinity of Dachau. So, both divisions that were going to be going through there—the 45<sup>th</sup> [Infantry Division] on the left, the 42<sup>nd</sup> [Infantry Division] on the right—were told, “There’s a camp out there. Whoever finds it, secure it, but keep on with your mission to get to Munich.” The mission was to seize Munich.

The 45<sup>th</sup> Division’s plan was that most likely it was the 157<sup>th</sup> [Regiment] that was going to find the camp, so the other two regiments were told, “Stand by to keep moving to Munich; don’t stop for anything.” And within the 157<sup>th</sup> Regiment, 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion was the one that finally hit Dachau. They were advancing with 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion on the right, right on the division boundary with the 42<sup>nd</sup> Division, and 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion on the left, and 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion in reserve. They were as much as possible vehicle-mounted and moving fast.

MH: Were they riding on armored tanks?

HF: They weren’t riding on tanks—we didn’t have any tanks—but they were riding on trucks.

MH: But they weren’t on the armored division tanks.

HF: No. No. The 20<sup>th</sup> Armored was even well behind that. Now, the division had a tank battalion attached to it, the 191<sup>st</sup> Tank Battalion. So, there may have been some of those guys up there; in fact, I think there were. But people were mounted up on trucks and motorcycles and tanks and whatever they could get, and they were going. And the plan was that when [Felix L.] Sparks’ battalion, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, hit Dachau they would secure it and then turn it over to the following 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, and then keep on moving to Munich. That was the overall plan; of course, the plan didn’t happen exactly that way, because they weren’t prepared for what they found.

MH: In military terms, if the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion hits it, why wouldn’t they just take the reserve battalion and say, “You go to Munich.”

HF: That’s what they did, ultimately. They did a combination of both, really. I’ve spoken to a couple of guys from Charlie Company, which is 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, and they were told—the direct quote was, “You gotta go in and relieve I Company, who have gone berserk.” And so, late in the afternoon, C Company and its attached heavy machine-gunners, to

include Ralph Fink, came in there with the purpose of relieving I Company, Item Company, so that they could continue, they could get out of there.

MH: What was the evidence that I Company had gone berserk?

HF: The shootings; the shootings had come up. The rumors had come back. And ultimately, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion left Dachau for Munich probably that evening; I don't recall the precise timing. But at a later time, they had to bring L Company back to perform guard duty. The corps people who were in charge gave the 42<sup>nd</sup> Division responsibility for the inner camp and the 45<sup>th</sup> Division the responsibility to guard the outer camp.

MH: Why? We're not talking about that much geography.

HF: No, but nonetheless, they put a company of each—one company, and Colonel [Walter] Fellenz's battalion, as a matter of fact, were guarding the prisoner enclosure to keep those guys in because of typhus and all sorts of other things. And then the outer military camp was guarded by L Company and probably some other guys.

MH: Of the 45<sup>th</sup>?

HF: Yeah, L Company of the 157<sup>th</sup>, of the 45<sup>th</sup>.

MH: Why wouldn't they just let one division do the job?

HF: Grandstanding? You know, the armed forces have always had a propensity to want their name in the papers. And so you see, for instance, right now in Afghanistan and Iraq, we have Navy SEALs fighting on mountaintops. Yeah. Navy SEALs aren't trained to fight on mountaintops, but they gotta have part of the action. And so, we probably had general officers at that point, both wanting to have credit for some stuff. There was a need for somebody to be there.

MH: You think they're lobbying for the job?

HF: Yeah, or somebody perceived they were lobbying. It might have been the corps commander that said, "Well, let's give 'em both a little bit of the pie."

MH: The corps commander was what, a lieutenant general?

HF: Yeah, but in that time he was probably a major general, authorized lieutenant general.

The corps had a plan for administering Dachau, and that plan included a guard force of a disarmed artillery battalion with pack howitzers, mountain howitzers, and they weren't using artillery much because they had this pursuit going on. They were just pushing Krauts out of the way, right and left. So, they told these guys, "Park your cannons, and you're going to be just guards." And so, they knew they were coming in. And they had a plan to bring hospital personnel in, and they had a commander set up; I think he was the G-5, a civil affairs guy. But they had to do something until that group got there and took over.

So, overall, the command of the whole Dachau area was under the 157<sup>th</sup> Infantry. The 442<sup>nd</sup>—I'm sorry, not the 442<sup>nd</sup>—the 42<sup>nd</sup> Division characters were occupying the concentration camp inside the larger thing. And visitors were directed to report to the CP [command post] of the 157<sup>th</sup> Infantry if they wanted to go into camp, into Dachau.

MH: A more general question: Almost without exception, the guys I've interviewed have said they were told nothing about concentration camps, nothing about death camps, nothing about slave labor camps. Some people knew a little bit about it; most of those, if I remember correctly, were Jewish guys who knew what the Nazis were doing before they went in the Army. But they knew nothing about it.

And there's only one exception to what I'm going to say: when they—that I've interviewed—get to a camp, they would occupy it, they would be warned, usually, "Don't feed these people, you'll kill them," and that, "We're bringing in medical care; we're bringing in food." How was the U.S. Army equipped to feed and give medical care to 30,000 prisoners in a Buchenwald or a Dachau, within days?

HF: It wasn't, but it was fortunate in that the condition of the war at that time was in its end. So, we were not having large numbers of our own wounded that the hospitals would not need to care for. And, as I just told you about this artillery battalion, they didn't need that many more to shoot artillery. They just needed the bodies to be guards and the same thing with these evacuation hospitals. We had pushed the Germans, you know; since March there had really been no cohesive defense and the number of wounded was much decreased. There's a theatre medical plan that they use, and the idea is you get them out of there, evacuate them to an appropriate level. And if they're going to be long-time

patients, get them completely out of the theatre so that you free up all our stuff. And that's our concept today.

MH: Right. But they had food available to feed 30,000 people.

HF: They were requisitioning the food from the Germans. They used their own food to the extent that they could, but the Germans had stockpiled food for the use of the military. They had huge warehouses full. And we requisitioned that, and we were issuing that to these guys.

MH: "Requisitioned" is a term of art.

HF: Yes, it is. We were taking this. And there were—the GIs participated in the marvelousness of some of these warehouses. There was one in Munich that was a frozen foods warehouse that was full of turkeys or chickens and strawberries, and the GIs just had a field day with that stuff. And immediately, all this stuff was seized; it was seized for the use of the U.S. Army, and that was sometimes used for the prisoners. We got the medical guys in there pretty quickly to say, "We're not going to give these guys candy bars and that sort of stuff; we have to give real small amounts, noodles and this kind of jazz, to bring 'em up." You know, they were eating very little to start with and were on the edge of extinction, so they didn't need much to keep 'em alive, I mean, the basic subsistence. So, they had enough food to spread it around. And there was a lot of food at Dachau itself, 'cause they were stocked up for a while. The Germans knew that their rail system was being systematically destroyed by the Americans, and so they took effort to stock stuff wherever they could to counterbalance the lack of good solid transportation.

MH: Okay. I think that's all I need to ask you right now.

HF: The priority very clearly was military, followed by civilian. One of my very good friends, Chan Rogers, was a platoon sergeant in G Company.<sup>1</sup> When they got into Munich, captured Munich, his company commander assigned him an apartment building and said, "Go in there and kick out the Germans and you guys take over, and that's where you're going to stay." And Chan said, "I can't just tell these people to get out of their homes." The company commander said, "Yeah, you're right. You and your men sleep in the street." And Rogers said, "I got the idea pretty quickly after that." (laughs)

MH: (laughs) All right. Thank you.

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<sup>1</sup> Chan Rogers was also interviewed for the Concentration Camp Liberators Oral History Project. The DOI for his interview is C65-00115.

*End of interview*