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William C. Galegar oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, July 18, 2008

William C. Galegar (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: Before we start, why don't you give me your full name and spell it, please.

William C. Galegar: Okay, it's William C. Galegar. William is spelled conventionally, W-i-l-l-i-a-m. C stands for a middle name of Clark, but I always just use the middle C. I'm actually named after my dad's brother. Galegar is a phonetic spelling, G-a-l-e-g-a-r, because Dad was left as an orphan when he was a youngster and the family that raised him was lucky to be able to spell, period.

MH: I see.

WG: Also, after he got old enough to know what the family name really was, he left it just like it was. He had a number of records, including his Army records.

MH: And your address is what?

WG: Address is....

MH: Okay, and your phone is....

WG: That's correct.

MH: And your email is....

WG: That's correct.

MH: And your date of birth is?

WG: It's April 27, 1924.

MH: And you were in the 99th Infantry Division.

WG: That's correct.

MH: Okay. So, let me just sort of start at the beginning. What were you doing before you went in the Army?

WG: Well, I was going to—I was reared as a farm boy up in a little Indian nation, the Osage Nation, in northeast Oklahoma. I was reared on a farm there. I had worked my way up through high school, and my dad was letting me take the income off the farm the last two years that I could use for my college expenses. So, when I went to college, I became very familiar with what the cost was, and I had just accumulated enough money to possibly go four semesters in school. And when we got into college, I had enrolled in engineering, because Dad and I had talked when I was in about the fifth or sixth grade about my future. And we had decided on one of three things: I'd either become an athlete, professional athlete, because I was fairly dexterous and fairly good at the things I'd attempted.

MH: What were your sports?

WG: My sports was baseball and basketball and everything. I ended up being all conference in a little league we had. We had some seven schools that were scattered around—one of them was a school actually in Tulsa—and they were scattered around to other places, and we played in tournaments. Our team was really never good enough to

be a constant winner, but for some reason the league and the coaches and the superintendents of schools felt that I deserved that honor, and I always appreciated it.

MH: So, what were the other possibilities of a career?

WG: The other possibilities was becoming a doctor, or becoming an engineer and everything. When I got into school, I found out what the cost was going to be to become a doctor, and I knew I wasn't going to have enough money to do that. So, I chose to be the engineer, because I didn't know whether my talents were good enough and professional to really get into the major leagues. Therefore, I had just decided that, well, I'd go into engineering. Actually, in the first semester in school, our military leader was talking to a few of us one day and he said, "I don't know whether you guys are interested or not, but you know, you can volunteer for service, and if you make a high enough score, then they will send you back to school."

MH: What year was this?

WG: This was my very first year, my very first semester.

MH: So it was 19—what?

WG: Nineteen forty-three.

MH: Forty-three [1943], okay.

WG: Actually, it was the fall of forty-two [1942].

MH: And what college were you at?

WG: It was Oklahoma A&M then; it's now Oklahoma State University.

MH: So, he was talking to you about the ASTP [Army Specialized Training Program] program.

WG: Yes. It wasn't identified as that at that time; they hadn't, uh, there. They allowed us to take that test in school and everything, and there were of course a few of us who passed it, and everything. Well, of course, I was hilarious. I thought, "My gosh, that's sure a lot better than following that horse around and having those long twelve, fourteen, sixteen-hour days that I was spending on the farm," and you know.

But, as it turned out, the Army was not really interested. They were interested in getting recruits and this kind of thing. So, when they decided to close the ASTP, they really didn't make an effort to get ASTP individuals into the areas where they could contribute the best at all. What they needed was manpower up there in the front. And for most of us, we were willing to do it, but you did have some hurt feelings and all.

MH: I'm sure.

WG: 'Cause we all expected to get degrees and this sort of thing, and we'd been promised—not basically by the military staff that went through basic and this sort of thing with, although he hinted at it; but the military instructors that we had at school felt for sure that when we got out of school, we'd be given commissions, because we were having to have an IQ exam that was ten points higher than the officers were having to pass.

MH: But they didn't mention to you that little clause about needs of the Army.

WG: Oh, no.

MH: I see.

WG: They didn't mention all the little skids that were in the road, you know, or all the bumps. That was something that was left for you to find out. And, of course, life is that way, and all. And I benefited from my experience in the infantry, from seeing how it looks from the bottom of a hole up towards the top (laughs) and all this. But, nevertheless, I think all things considered, that the Army side could have made—now, the Navy did a much better job. We had choices of taking whatever branch of service that we wanted when we enlisted and everything. Those individuals who enlisted in the Navy, the Navy honored their thing. I had a close friend who went through ASTP; in fact, he didn't graduate until 1947, two years after the war was over.

MH: So, how long did they let you stay at Oklahoma?

WG: Just for that semester and about half of the next one, and then they called us in for basic training and all, which was a modified basic training in terms of the basic training that the regular infantry soldier went through. Most of the regulars went through about seventeen weeks of training; we went through about thirteen, fourteen weeks.

MH: Where did they send you?

WG: Down to Camp Maxey, Texas, which was near the little town of Paris, Texas.

MH: When you get that notification that, “Oh, by the way, the deal’s off; you’re going in the infantry,” how do you feel?

WG: Well, actually, I didn’t think I was going. One of our adjoining roommates knew a representative in Congress who he thought could help us out a little bit, a fellow named Johnson. I don’t know whether that name rings a bell to you or not.

MH: As in Lyndon?

WG: As in Lyndon. So, he placed a call to him, and Lyndon said he’d see what he could do. And the eight of us qualified for Air Force transfer, even though the transfers weren’t being—requests weren’t being honored at that time. When we enlisted, we were told that we could transfer to any branch of service we wanted. That was one of the things that the military advisors told us at Oklahoma A&M when we were considering all this. So, most of us didn’t really pay much attention to which branch of service we were going into.

But, anyway, the upshot of it was that we thought we were going to go in, and we were assured—and this was in January when we first became alerted to the fact that ASTP might be closing. Rumors float real, real vigorously in the military, many times earlier than what the news really gets out to the press. Well, we had found that out, and we had a colonel over our group—I can’t recall his name right now; I’d have to go back to my records—but he kept us pretty well informed as to what was going on, as far as he knew about it.

Well, when we got accepted and this sort of thing, we just sat back, because when we heard that they were going to send everybody back to the infantry, the eight of us—four in each room—we just sat back and said, “Well, okay.” Well, when they did load

everybody up in buses, they took all of us, including those who were being transferred to other spots, up to Camp Maxey. And when they got to signing people, they let the eight of us sort of sit back for a couple of weeks while everybody else got assigned.

Then one morning, one of the non-coms [non-commissioned officers] came in and tapped us on the shoulder and said, “By the way, you need to report over to the CO [commanding officer].” And we found out that the Air Force had not—it was closing all recruitments. That was when the news got out that the Air Force—in forty-four [1944]—that the Air Force was not taking any more enlistments. In fact, after we were overseas, after the Battle of the Bulge, one of the replacements I got in my squad was an individual who had completed right up to the point where he was ready to be commissioned, and he was sent over as one of our replacements. You talk about somebody who was unhappy. (laughs) He was.

But, anyway, basically we went through that whole thing, and each day, either through the hardship or the experience that we were obtaining, I think each individual accumulated something that helped him out through the rest of his life. And it basically was that things can be tough, but they can be tougher. So, you just make the best of it.

MH: So, how long were you at Maxey?

WG: At Maxey, just from—I think we went over there towards the end of—somewhere between the middle and fourth week of April and everything.

MH: When you say you went over, you mean to Europe?

WG: No. No, from—

MH: Oh, to Maxey. Okay.

WG: When we went from our college back to Maxey. Then we stayed at Maxey until August, and then in the middle part of August, they got us aboard a troop train and we headed for the East Coast and everything. Soon after that, in the early part of September, we were loaded aboard ships and headed to Europe, and we spent three weeks in England. Then we boarded more ships and went across the channel. We didn’t actually dock in Le Havre, the ships, because of the wreckage and because of the bombings and everything; you couldn’t get into the harbor. The ships had to dock outside the harbor and we took little transports.

MH: Climbing over the side down the ropes?

WG: Over the side and down and everything—and this was at midnight—onto the dock, climbed aboard trucks, and we're transported from there down to Belgium.

MH: So, at this point, you're still not in the unit, right?

WG: Oh, yes, we were in the 90th Division—I mean, 99th.

MH: Oh, so you went over with the 99th.

WG: Yes. What happened, the 99th had been training in Louisiana. The manpower shortage got so bad—and I never did get an official knowledge about why—but they stripped the division of all this trained manpower and sent it over as replacements of the units that had been losing manpower because of (inaudible). Now, that's the story I got, and I'm supposing that was true.

MH: So, you got over after the Battle of the Bulge?

WG: Oh, no. No, we were the Battle of the Bulge. We stopped the whole cockeyed German thrust, our little ol' division. The main force of that German attack—there were two new divisions in our area at the time. The 99th was one. I'll have to look at those records to see, but the other division was even newer than we were.

MH: Would that have been the 103rd?

WG: That could be.

MH: Okay. Well, I can figure it out.

WG: Yeah, it'll show there, because that division was really torn up. But our division had been torn up because they took the regiment I was in and placed it as the protective regiment that was going to protect the 4th Division, who had the mission of attacking the

dams on the German rivers right up ahead. The Allies were afraid to really go very far until they got control of those, because the Germans—they knew if we ever got into those valleys, the Germans would destroy those dams and just try to wash whatever armies were down there downstream.

MH: So, was the Bulge your first major combat?

WG: Oh, yes. Yeah, that was—in October, when we first got up on the line, at the end of October, they had us on front-line mission duties, standing guard and having a foxhole. I actually went on a combat patrol and everything, and some of the other guys went on a patrol. I think I was the only—well, there were two in our company that went on this combat patrol.

MH: You were carrying an M1 rifle?

WG: No, I was carrying a BAR. I went over as a Browning Automatic Rifleman, and this sort of thing. Actually, I had one other man assigned to me, and our lieutenant had the squads—they were divided up generally into groups. They had riflemen, then generally, each squad had one or two people designated as scouts, and then each squad had a BAR man and assistant BAR man. Well, the scout—the lieutenant decided that the scout could help, since the firepower for the squad was located in that BAR, that the scout could help as a three-man unit there when he wasn't.

MH: I don't know if you recall this, but what's the magazine on a BAR hold?

WG: Twenty rounds.

MH: Twenty rounds. That's not very much.

WG: Not very much, but—

MH: Compared to eight in an M1, I guess it's more.

WG: Well, you had twenty of those in your belt, instead of what the others hold, and your assistant gunner also had twenty of those.

MH: And what kind of magazine is it?

WG: It's a little metal magazine that looks like a very enlarged rifle clip, except instead of like a rifle clip, which is open at each end, it looks like a flat container. And the bullets will only come out at the top.

MH: So, it's sort of like the M14 that I carried in Vietnam.

WG: Well, it could be; I never did get to see that M14. It was something that—

MH: And it's firing the standard round, right?

WG: It fires standard round, yes, except it's a way of a lot more accurate than the ordinary rifle. You could shoot 300 and 400 yard shots and be darned accurate with it.

MH: Well, when you fired a BAR, were you firing it on automatic or were you firing it on single shot?

WG: Well, you could do it both ways. There's a little gas port up in front that regulates the firing—and in fact, I got into trouble with this, because I was reared with a dad who served in World War I, and he taught me about guns starting at age four, years of age. So, it was always my training that if you're going to monkey with a gun, always find out everything you can about it. Well, on the BAR, we were being trained and everything and they were encouraging us to, you know, tear it down, look at it; be able to assemble it and disassemble it blindfolded, basically. But, when they taught us about this gas port, and everything, they taught us this way: they said, "Be sure that gas port is always open," and they showed us how it could be partially closed if you didn't tighten that bolt down, the gas port regulator.

Well, out on the firing range when we were there—I was interested in accuracy. We were training to fire two and three shots at a time, and sometimes four if you couldn't get your finger off that trigger fast enough. Your bullets would spray, so they'd cover a wider area. Well, one day when we were out there, I just adjusted it so I could fire single shots because I wanted to be sure I knew where I was shooting. We happened to be shooting at 200 yards at the time. And with the tripods down and this sort of thing, I made my adjustments with my sight so I could hit that target with no problems at all. And there were other riflemen that were down there that were shooting at targets, too.

So, they didn't know whether the guy on the target down there—didn't know whether this was a rifleman or a BAR man that was shooting at his target. So, I got to put in about forty or fifty rounds there at the 200, and then they moved us back to the 300 yard target and found the same cockeyed thing: that with the immobility that you could get with that stand and everything, and in the prone position, you could just shoot single shots off, and if your sight was appropriate, you could hit the bull's-eye every time.

MH: That puts you in sniper category.

WG: Oh, yes, it did. And they used me in the company as a sniper from time to time, since they knew that I could shoot single rounds at a time. I wouldn't get—a BAR man was a pick target if the Germans could find out who had the BAR. They'd not only use their own, but they would turn their mortars and their cannons loose on that position. You know. So, I was interested in not being identified as a BAR when I was active in shooting. I did shoot a few times when we got into the attack mode, and on combat patrol, when we would get out on that. And, actually, I grew to sort of love that gun. The captain had to talk me into being a squad leader, because the three guys that were with me, our little team, we'd gotten very, very close. We didn't want to break it up. You've had those same feelings, I'm sure.

MH: So, tell me about your first heavy combat experience.

WG: Well, the first heavy combat experience was that Bulge; actually, it preceded the Bulge. We kicked off for the attack on the Ruhr dams and all, a couple of days before on the thirteenth of December.

MH: That's the Ruhr River?

WG: For the Ruhr River.

MH: R-u-h-r?

WG: Yes.

MH: Okay, go ahead.

WG: And there were a series of dams that were on that, two as far as I remember, and they were one above the other. And we were going to attack those; we were going to be the protector for the edge of the division that was going to attack them. So, we had gone through both segments of the Siegfried Line; we'd penetrated both of them and we were into Germany.

MH: I didn't realize—when you say “both segments,” two segments of German lines? Or was part the Maginot Line and then the Siegfried Line?

WG: The German Siegfried Line had a main line, and then back of it, they had a second defensive group that was about—oh, it varied, depending on the terrain and this sort of thing, but it was about a quarter to half a mile from where we were attacking to go through the second one.

We took a number of pillboxes when we penetrated the line, and then the very next day, a squad from the first platoon went up and took a couple more pillboxes that was in the secondary. They didn't stay up there, but they came on back to the company. And on the fifteenth, which was the day that the Germans attacked—we had heard a lot of noise on the night of the fourteenth and the morning of the fifteenth and we knew something was going on, but we didn't know what it was. Up to that time, we had gotten a few people who were wounded or killed and everything, but I had escaped much.

Except in attacking those pillboxes, the German machine gunners had picked out our particular platoon as we crossed over toward the pillboxes. We were going to attack, and they pinned us down and opened what we called the firing lane, out in front of the pillbox, but we were able to maintain enough fire on the pillbox that they couldn't open it up and shoot back of us. But the fire was actually coming from the pillboxes and the troops that were up the line from where we were attacking. But the bullets that the Germans were firing were coming very, very close over us.

My assistant gunner, who was a flat-footed Pennsylvanian—and that's one reason that I selected him—Ol' Tank, you know, was always a jokester. In fact, he had been a musician and everything, played in a Polish band. But Tankowitz—when the firing and mortar fire started coming in, we run for the same hole, not really realizing it. But Tank, of all people, beat me to that hole, and I plopped in on top of him.

MH: How big a hole is this?

WG: Well, it was just big enough to get him in and half of me.

MH: Which half of you was out?

WG: Well, the backside of me.

MH: I see.

WG: I could practically feel those bullets buzzing over me. So, I told Tank, I said, “Tank, get out your tool and let’s deepen this hole a little bit.” He said, “Well, raise up so I can get it out.” I says, “I can’t raise up, I’ll get shot!” and he said, “Well, okay.” Well, the mortar fire—your experience probably parallels mine. The Germans had a way of walking their mortar fire in. And we could tell by watching it, and so I could tell about the third or fourth round before it got to us. I said, “Tank, if we don’t get down pretty quick, we’re going to get one of those rounds right outside our hole.”

Well, pretty soon, we did get that round outside. And the dust, I thought it was never going to settle. I thought, “My gosh, what in the world is happening?” And then I realized, well, the body underneath me was diggin’ towards China. (laughs) Somehow, during that episode, Tank had gotten out his little shovel, and he was somehow getting that dirt flying and everything.

MH: So, that means he’s throwing it past your face out of the—

WG: Yeah, he was throwing wherever he could; part of it was going past my face, and with the dirt—I’m not sure I had both eyes open, but I could—anyway, he kept on digging there for a moment, and I said, “Well, let’s see what’s going to happen.” Well, surprisingly, about that time, the mortar fire and the rifle fire stopped. And I’m presuming that companies from the other parts of the division had captured the other German facilities.

MH: So, you never got hit in the backside.

WG: Never got hit in the back there at all. In fact, during all of the things, my career in the service, except when I thought that I’d gotten killed crossing over the Rhine River there, I had luck all through that darn war.

MH: Let me jump ahead. How does one think he almost got killed?

WG: Well, what happened was, I had left our squad that crossed the Rhine River there at Ludendorff.

MH: And what were you—

WG: I was an assistant squad leader, actually, at the time.

MH: This is after the Bulge?

WG: Huh?

MH: This is after the Bulge?

WG: Oh, yeah. This was after the Bulge, and we had already driven to the Rhine across the Cologne plains.

MH: What's your rank at this point?

WG: My rank was sergeant.

MH: Buck sergeant, three stripes?

WG: Buck sergeant, yeah.

MH: How were you gonna cross the Rhine?

WG: Oh, we crossed over the Ludendorff Bridge, where [George S.] Patton captured it—

MH: The Bridge at Remagen.

WG: I mean Remagen, yes. We identified it as the Ludendorff, because it was the bridge that the railroad had there. Yeah, we crossed—we were the first—

MH: So, you were in that first group of infantry that went across?

WG: We were the first division across that bridge.

MH: And you were crossing at night?

WG: Oh, well, the division crossed all during the day, but our crossing was in mid-afternoon on the eleventh of March, after he had captured it on the ninth, and—

MH: So this was—how far before—how far after you crossed did that bridge collapse?

WG: Oh, it didn't collapse until the seventeenth or eighteenth of March. Now, we got to see it, but I'd crossed it and taken a squad down, oh, probably 400 or 500 yards—not down but up, to the north on the river, because that was the direction that our division was going.

MH: You were heading for the Autobahn.

WG: Yes. Yes. When we got down there, it was in the mid-afternoon and they told us to take over some German houses, and we did. We went over and took the squad in. The company cook—we hadn't eaten in quite a few days, in terms of cooked food, but they somehow had gotten across the river with some prepared food. So, I sent the squad on down, and a couple of the men stayed there with me. Finally, I sent that one man on down and the other one stayed; and when they all got back, well, the two of us started down to pick up a meal.

About halfway down to where the kitchen was, I heard this shell coming in. And I knew, since my dad had also been wounded in World War I, what it was—it goes absolutely dead. You hear it coming, and all at once you can't hear it.

MH: Because it started to drop down.

WG: It started to drop down.

MH: Yes.

WG: So, I turned my head to tell this squad man, “Hit the ditch!” That’s the last I knew until I woke up about an hour later. I woke up, and our company aid man was answering a question. I heard the question. One of my squad people said, “How is he?” and he said, “It doesn’t look like there’s much hope.” Well, I thought they were talking about the man I’d taken along with me, so I rolled my head over and I said, “Is he hurt badly?”

MH: And you scared the crap out of the aid man.

WG: Oh, I scared the crap out of everybody in the room. And three guys jumped over and held me down there on the bed to keep me from moving anymore, and said, “Bill, you’re seriously hurt. We’ve already notified the ambulance, and they’re going to come by and pick you up.” So they—it was just, I don’t know, fifteen or twenty minutes later—they did. And they wouldn’t let me walk to the ambulance. The ambulance crew came in and they picked me up and loaded me in there. When we got to the—

MH: Were you bleeding?

WG: Oh, bleeding—I bled; that was the big thing. I had scratches all over my head and everything, and they didn’t know, but there was blood all over my uniform, too, where it had come out. When I got to the hospital, I noticed the guy that was—the squad man that was with me was sittin’ there, and he wasn’t saying anything and he looked like he was out of it.

So, when we got into the room and the doctor came to me, I said, “Doctor, would you please look at my friend over there first? He looks like he really needs your attention.” The doc said, “We’re going to tend to him, but I’ve got to see you first.” Well, they worked on me for a while and they finally got a nurse and nurse’s aide over there, and they started cleaning up the blood. And the doctor, he said, “Well, we’re going to keep you here for a while and see what this situation is.” I said, “Well, okay.”

So, that night, the Germans continued their attack on the bridge. The first aid station and this sort of thing was in the area where some of their shells and bombs—'cause the Germans were still trying to bomb that bridge out.

MH: They hadn't taken you back across to the other side, had they?

WG: Oh, yes.

MH: Oh, you were back on the other side?

WG: Oh, yeah. I was back and probably—the aid station was probably a quarter of a mile or half a mile on the western side of the bridge, toward England and everything. So, I thought, "Christ, if I'm going to get killed here, I might as well go back to the company." So anyway, I stayed that day. That night they continued, of course, the bombing and the running and this sort of thing.

The next morning, I had gotten up and I'd put on a uniform and this sort of thing, and somehow found my helmet. When I did it, I walked outside to see if I could see what damage was done or anything. And, of all things, the company jeep came up—and I knew the company jeep driver. So, I asked old Collins, "What're you going to do?" He said, "Oh, I just brought some more people in. I'm going back." I said, "Do you have a full load?" And he says, "Nope, I'm just going back by myself." I said, "You mind if I hitch a ride?" He said no, so I jumped the hospital and went back.

MH: How badly had you been hit? Or was it just scratches?

WG: Well, it apparently was just scratches on the head and this sort of thing, and a concussion that knocked me out. I found out later that I had a piece of shrapnel in my stomach that had not penetrated very deep. It came out several months later; it was there, and it was something that I didn't even know about.

MH: So, it's sort of like Mark Twain, "Rumors of my death are greatly exaggerated."

WG: Yes, yes, they were. And I always felt so blessed, because they were some very, very fine men who lost their lives in that war, and who would have benefited this nation greatly if they had been able to live and produce.

MH: What do you think the Germans were lobbing at you? Was it a mortar or was it an 88?

WG: No, it was an artillery shell. And it was a large one, apparently, because what also happened, and he was brought along in the same—a German was standing outside the building close to where they picked me up, and he got a piece of large shrapnel in his back. And he died on the table that evening.

MH: He was a German civilian?

WG: Yes, he was a German civilian.

MH: When they tell you to take over a house and you go in there, is the family usually still in there?

WG: In this case, it was.

MH: So what do you say?

WG: You just go in, and the first thing you just say is, “*Verstehen Sie Englisch?*” and all, which, “Do you understand English?” And most of the time, they would say, “A little.” We’d say, “We are taking over your house for this evening, and we’re sorry. We will let you stay here, too, but we will restrict you to the area that we will place you in until we leave.”

MH: Where’d you put them?

WG: We’d generally place them in a bedroom or a facility where they could go to sleep.

MH: So, how many Americans would go into a house, for example?

WG: Well, in most of the cases, it’d be a squad; the squad pretty much was a unit.

MH: So, it's like eight or nine or ten guys.

WG: Yeah, it'd be eight to twelve in there, depending on whether you'd gotten all your replacements in.

MH: And somebody would stay awake on guard duty to make sure that—

WG: There was always somebody, generally two people, awake because you'd have somebody outside at the door where they could alert you if somebody was approaching that you didn't know about. But inside, just to make sure somebody wasn't—but you'd also search the house real, real closely to make sure there weren't weapons there.

MH: Did you ever find weapons?

WG: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Many, many of the German houses had pistols or—

MH: Shotguns?

WG: Well, a few shotguns. We actually recovered more shotguns after the war than we did during the war. I don't know why, but I used a 16 gauge shotgun that we recovered all from the time the war was over until I come home. It was a double-barrel. Actually, it was used to harvest deer, and I didn't realize it for a long time because I was trying to hunt some pheasant that was in the forest area that we were in. Gosh, I kept missing them and I couldn't figure that out.

MH: You were firing deer slugs?

WG: It was deer slugs, the ammunition that I was using. And I couldn't find any bird shot.

MH: If you can hit a pheasant with a deer slug, you're a pretty good shot.

WG: (laughs) Yes, yes. No, I couldn't do that because we were always trying to hit those boogers on the wing.

MH: So, tell me when—at this point in the war, had anybody told you about the Holocaust or concentration camps?

WG: Well, we knew that—yes. We didn't know the severity as bad as until after the war. But yes, we did, because see, during the Bulge, there were many of the 99th people who were captured. Like, in the end of January, I got a letter from the mother of my roommate, who happened to live down in Texas, wanting to know if I knew what had happened to Bill. And she was fearful that he had been killed.

Well, I didn't know, of course. I knew that his unit had been pretty well hit with the influence of the Germans during that initial attack, but I didn't find out until after the war. But I wrote her back a very encouraging letter telling her that if she hadn't heard anything, it was very encouraging, so just hope that the food supply held out for him to survive. Bill turned out to be a judge in Texas after the war. (laughs) But the upshot of it was that I visited Bill and his parents after the war was over. His mother said, "Boy, Bill, your letter was really encouraging. At the time, I was really down in the dumps. I didn't think there was any way that my Bill could have survived when I heard about some of the atrocities."

MH: But even at the Bulge, you didn't know about the atrocities, did you?

WG: Well, see, the thing is, we knew that the Germans killed American prisoners when they didn't have the manpower or the desire to take them back, and we associated this with the SS. So, we knew that there was a strong possibility that if you were a civilian and didn't have any defensive training, that sort of thing, that you could suffer very, very severely. We didn't know how badly that some of the Jewish people had suffered. My wife and I have been lucky enough after the war was over to visit some of those concentration camps, particularly in Poland, where the Germans really did their work of killing.

MH: But the Army never officially told you?

WG: Oh, no. The Army did not officially tell us of what was going on, and this sort of thing. No. One of the bad things about being a front-line troop, as you probably know, is that information that you get is generally by the rumor mill. And it's surprising how much of that that comes down. There was a little Army newspaper, but unfortunately, it didn't get to the front-line troops unless we were in a stationary position.

MH: You're talking about *Stars and Stripes*?

WG: Yeah, and this sort of thing. We got it very, very infrequently. We got it a few times in the very early part of the war, but after we got on the move—our division didn't stay around any place very long because of the way we were set up, and I don't know why the other reasons. But I know that [Dwight D.] Eisenhower thought it was good enough that he wasn't going to take it off the top-secret list, even though Germans knew about it from the Battle of the Bulge. You never saw any publicity being released about the 99th, and I think it's largely because we were such a specialized division with the TDs and this sort of thing. We were very mobile.

MH: TDs are the tank destroyers?

WG: Uh-huh. You had about one TD for every squad.

MH: What's a TD?

WG: It looks like a tank, except it doesn't have a lid on the top of it. And you feel much more comfortable than you do with tanks, because in combat, when the things get rough and the fighting starts, our experience with tanks was that the tank commander would always close the lid and button up and everything and they would start going. And the only thing they could see out then was with that little periscope, which meant that they couldn't see a whole broad area except for what was directly in front of that periscope. And so, if you happened to have some difficulty or be in a foxhole or something like that in front of them, they'd run over you and never see you.

But a tank destroyer was more like mobile artillery, and the guy would—the commander of that tank, he was more like you. And he knew that his top of his vehicle was open, so he spent a lot of his time up there looking around 360 degrees. And since he had a squad that was attached to that TD, he also made sure that his protection was there, 'cause the biggest vulnerability that a tank destroyer had during our day was to have some infantryman slip up with a weapon, like a bazooka or something like that, that could hit you. Our answer to that was to have some good riflemen or good infantrymen who would be there to keep those guys off of your heels.

MH: Do you remember going through a place called Hadamar?

WG: Hadamar?

MH: H-a-d-a-m-a-r, Hadamar.

WG: Oh, it doesn't ring a bell.

MH: What about Giessen?

WG: Giessen?

MH: Yeah. G-i-e-s-s-e-n.

WG: Well, the name is vaguely familiar, but I'd have to look at the map.

MH: What regiment were you in?

WG: 99th.

MH: That's the division; the regiment?

WG: Oh, the 395th.

MH: 395th, okay. And you remember your company?

WG: Oh, yes. Company G.

MH: Company G. So, what's the first camp, slave labor camp or concentration camp, you came to? What was that experience like?

WG: Oh, it was a shock and a surprise, because the first ones that I remember that our particular company came across—and it wasn't the company that came across it. We had closed the pocket in the Bulge. The next morning, after we had closed that and sent all

those German soldiers and everything back, you know, the CO decided he'd better send out a patrol to the surrounding areas to see what we had out there that we'd overlooked.

MH: This is back in January?

WG: This was—well, no. The Ruhr pocket wasn't closed until—we didn't get to the Rhine River until March.

MH: March, okay.

WG: So, it had to have been toward the tail end of March. So, they picked me and three TDs, and so we started over the countryside—well, my squad, not just me. We got on these TDs, a few of us on each TD, and started out. And we suddenly broke out of the woods into a large fenced-in area. And inside were a whole bunch of people who were not running, and we, of course, looked first to see that the guard towers were not manned.

MH: This is barbed-wire fences?

WG: They were barbed-wire fences on this particular one. But we jumped off the TDs just to run inside and see, and there were some people who were dead, laying in the bunks in there.

MH: Let me ask you: was there a gate there that was already open? Or did you have to bust through?

WG: Oh, no, it was already open.

MH: How many live people do you think you're looking at when you're seeing this?

WG: Well, you know, you didn't really bother to count. You're just—there were, I would say, somewhere between thirty and fifty that were out in the yard. But we didn't check all the barracks.

MH: And this is daylight?

WG: This was daylight; this was morning, yeah.

MH: Was it a sunny morning, raining, cloudy?

WG: Oh, no, it was bright and clear. One of the individuals that was there could speak English, and we just asked, "Are there any Germans around?" and he said no. We said, "Well, what is the situation here?" He said, "Well, they've run." I said, "What about the people inside?" and he said, "Well, some of them don't care anymore and some of them are going to need some medical help," and this sort of thing. I said, "Well, we can't help on that."

MH: Was this guy an American?

WG: No, he wasn't. In fact, I got the impression that it was a mixture of people who were in that camp; some of them supposedly were Russians. They were prisoners who had been working in the industries that supported the war effort for Germany.

MH: Right. So, it was one of the slave camps.

WG: Yes. Yes.

MH: How many buildings did you see?

WG: Oh, I just really peeked in this one. And there must have been oh, something like twelve or fifteen. And there were buildings that were similar to what was your GI training things. It wasn't concrete structures; it was something like in your military camps that you house troops.

MH: Like Quonset huts?

WG: Like a Quonset hut.

MH: Or was it an A-frame?

WG: Well, no, it was—well, I don't remember that clearly, the detail. The thing that I seem to recall is that they—some of them were two-story and some of them just one. But I don't remember it closely, 'cause we didn't spend that much time there.

MH: So, they were wooden buildings?

WG: They were wooden buildings.

MH: And when you peeked inside one, what do you see?

WG: Inside was very much like an American building that had been completed for multiple occupancy, you know, with beds and this sort of thing. It looked very much like a military structure on the inside.

MH: Like a barracks.

WG: Like a barracks.

MH: Were there men and women, or just men?

WG: Men is all I recall seeing. We just didn't check close enough.

MH: And what are they wearing?

WG: They were just wearing ordinary clothing, nothing distinctive that I recall.

MH: And did they look like they'd been starved to death?

WG: No, they just looked—if I hadn't been told by this individual that they were prisoners of the Germans who had been working in their industries for the war effort, I wouldn't have been able to tell them different from the German civilians that were walking around, except their clothing of course looked very, very poor and ill kept, and this sort of thing. We just didn't look at them close enough to get that, because our orders

were that we were to make this survey and we were out to see if there were any Germans, and we would report back that we had found this camp, but that was all that we would do. And then the follow-up troops have the job of taking care of those.

MH: Did they tell you how many Germans had fled?

WG: No; normally, we don't ask that unless there is some really important reason. The fact that they had fled was the most important thing to us right then, and that they probably had thrown their weapons away. We had run into this in the past, not so much at a concentration camp, but where we had taken a town or a village that was being defended by Germans. They would try to conceal or get rid of their weapons and change into civilian clothes and leave, or integrate themselves into the civilian population, and this sort of thing. But it wasn't something that we had not seen before.

MH: Did this guy ask you for food?

WG: No, he didn't. He apparently had experienced these quick checks before or something, not by us or the military but by the Germans and this sort of thing, who had come by the check up or something like that. No, he didn't. He just asked if we would send help. And of course, we said that we didn't know how soon it'd come, but we would report back that they were there.

MH: So, how many guys in your unit actually got off the TDs and went into this camp?

WG: Oh, probably a couple, three of us, just enough to make sure. Most of the time when you're riding on those TDs, if you're riding for a long time, getting back up on them and getting off of them is the biggest chore you have. But since I—

MH: It's a long jump down, isn't it?

WG: Well, it's a long jump down, and normally they expect the squad leaders to make that jump and get back on. And I didn't disappoint them. That was just something that—

MH: So, then you go back to your unit and report what you found.

WG: Right.

MH: And then what happens?

WG: Well, I don't know. We didn't stay. Within a couple of days from then, we were on our way down to the Danube River and getting ready to go across it.

MH: What was the next camp you came to?

WG: Well, the next one that I really remember was the last one that we really took, and to this day, I was trying to search for the name of it.

MH: Is it Mühldorf? Because that's the one that the 99th is credited to having been to, which was a sub-camp of Dachau.

WG: Well, is that the one across the Danube?

MH: That I would have to look up.

WG: See, that's what I can't find in any of my records. I did not record any names of that, but I remember the briefing that we got as we went into this thing. We had to fight our way to the Danube River and everything, and on the way there we were being briefed about some things we could expect. And one of them was that when we crossed the river, there was a camp over there that had 10,000 PWs in it. So, we said okay. When we got across and got over there, we found there were 10,000. In fact, there were 30,000.

MH: Prisoners of war?

WG: Yeah. Of various—English, French, the Russians, and quite a few various civilian groups who had been brought in, and we never, never really got to talk with them. When we released them, those people started raiding all the German stores for food and everything else that they could find, and making their own little fires along the road or wherever they could find a place to cook food and this sort of thing. And some of them were storing some in their little old packs, you know, and some of them were already starting to walk back toward the area that they thought their country was located in.

MH: So, clearly that wasn't a concentration camp.

WG: No, that wasn't a concentration camp as I associated it with. I just thought of it as a camp that the Germans had contained their prisoners in, and this sort of thing. But the funny thing is that one of my friends released his brother from that camp. And that was always quite a story, because his brother was in the Air Force and had gotten shot down. And he was really pleased to find out he was still alive.

MH: I'm looking on the web as we're talking; could it have been Moosberg?

WG: Moosberg, that sounds familiar.

MH: Hang on just one second; let me see what I can find. Well, here was something at Hemer, H-e-m-e-r. "The 99th and the 7th Armored set free more than 20,000 Soviet and Polish prisoners of war." "As the division neared the Danube, the end of World War II was near"—blah blah blah blah—"down to the Danube, across the Danube." This says "Moosgerg," but I think it was Moosberg, across the Danube.

WG: Well, Moosberg sounds familiar. And that's pretty much the way I remember it. I'd have to go back and look at the details of my notes.

MH: Did you come across any of the concentration camps at all?

WG: Not of the ones that are given the notoriety that you read about in the press, that I know of.

MH: Forget notoriety; did you find any that were even small that were slave labor camps?

WG: See, the thing was, in infantry in our day, when we would get to a camp, if the Germans had fled from it, we didn't really pay much attention to that camp except note that it was there. And then the CO, he made the report to anybody who had to come in for help. See, we always had follow-up groups coming up after the battle, who cleaned up the battlefield of people who were wounded or people who were hurt, or stuff that had been abandoned that had to be collected and reused and all that kind of stuff. The troops who were actually doing the fighting weren't still long enough to do any of that. The Bulge was the last time during the war that our division actually was stationary long enough for

us to check anything out in detail for, you know, for names or remembrances and this kind of thing.

Most of my information that I have I actually got when after the war was over. I got the company records from the CO's office and started writing my own little history of what I had experienced, and those records didn't contain any names of camps. So, the thing is, the only way you could tell whether we had an experience with those camps is to see what the path was of the—not of the 99th, particularly, but the 395th regiment, and that would probably be close enough to associate us with it. But I'm sorry about that, because I've been looking for you and I suddenly realized two or three weeks ago that boy, I wasn't going to have anything for you.

MH: No, that's okay. So you never got to any place where there were, you know, stacks of bodies or anything like that.

WG: No, not in that sense. Yeah. And to tell you the truth, even Auschwitz, the stacks of bodies that they keep talking about were really never a thing of fact. The Germans burnt all those bodies; and if they didn't burn them, they buried them right away. Now, there were a few places right during the very early part of the war where they lined people up in trenches and ditches and machine-gunned them, or this sort of thing. But the thing was that somebody took license trying to really dress up the story or trying to get interest or something like that about some of these things.

MH: Where were you when the war ended?

WG: Over there at Moosberg.

MH: Oh, at Moosberg. Okay. And then how soon did you get back to the States?

WG: I came back in September of 1945.

MH: And did what?

WG: Took forty-five days of leave that the Army gave you for recovery—I forgot what they called it—and everything. So, I piddled around on the farm with Dad and all, helping out there, and then was discharged October 30. I piddled around a little more, and

then in December I started going back down to Oklahoma A&M to re-enroll in school. Got back into school, and finally got out in 1949.

MH: As an engineer?

WG: As an engineer.

MH: And that's what you did for most of your career?

WG: Yes.

MH: When did you retire?

WG: I retired in 1982.

MH: So, what have you been doing since then?

WG: Well, since then I've been primarily enjoying myself and been doing some public service in the little town that we retired to, the little town of Ada, Oklahoma. We were trying to do some things with our basic church. Then we were doing some things trying to help those having trouble getting enough to eat or getting a place to sleep, so I ran an organization there for the city that handled these for several years, for free. And then for the last eight or so years of that, I did tax work for free for those people, who were in a low-income bracket and were trying to meet the law but not overpay what they owed.

Part 1 ends; part 2 begins

MH: How old are you now?

WG: Eighty-four.

MH: Eighty-four. You're married?

WG: Oh, yes, I got a bride. We'll have sixty-two years in August, and without her, I would have been nothing. She's been my saving grace.

MH: Is she sitting there listening to you say this?

WG: Yes, she is.

MH: I figured as much. (laughs)

WG: (laughs) I have a purpose.

MH: And children?

WG: We have two daughters, who are really excellent. Neither one of those are here, but they get here. We're now at a retirement home and everything, because we're both at the age where we're requiring some assistance, and those daughters think we need more than we do. But they're with us practically every day of the week for a short period of time, just checking to make sure that Mommy and Daddy are okay.

MH: You have grandkids?

WG: Oh, yes. We got four grandchildren—two grandsons and two granddaughters—and they're all four of them is just doing great. In fact, one of them just became a vice president of his little company that he's with, and we're really shocked. And, of course, I'm sort of proud, 'cause he has a lot of my traits and complexion. Of course, he has a lot of traits of his dad and mother, too. The other child, the youngest one, just got out of college, and she graduated with honors and this sort of thing. So, we're just really, really fortunate.

MH: Okay. Well, I thank you very, very much for taking the time to talk with me. I really appreciate it.

WG: I'm sorry that I can't give you something more specific and more interesting, but this is—Jean and I—part of my work took me to some of these foreign countries. We had some projects in Poland that I had to oversee, and I'm telling you, Auschwitz was quite a camp.

MH: Right. I've been there.

WG: Yeah. Okay. So, you know.

MH: I know what you're talking about.

WG: Right.

MH: Okay, thank you very much, Mr. Galegar. I sure appreciate it.

WG: Well, best of luck and everything, and hope you success.

MH: Thank you. Take care. Bye-bye.

WG: Bye-bye.

End of interview