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John R. Hallowell oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, September 10, 2008

John R. Hallowell (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: Could you give me your full name and spell it for me, please?

John Hallowell: Okay, it's John R. Hallowell, H-a-l-l-o-w-e-l-l. Got that one all right?

MH: Well, I hope so. What was your date of birth, sir?

JH: 9-27-1920 [September 27, 1920].

MH: 9-27-20. You were with the 45th Infantry Division, and you ended up in Dachau.

JH: I was with the 157th Infantry [Regiment].

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

JH: Before I went in the Army? Oh, I was going to college in Missoula, Montana. I graduated and got in the Army the same month I graduated. (laughs)

MH: Graduated from college, and they got you in the Army?

JH: Yeah.

MH: You were drafted, then?

JH: Yeah, I got drafted.

MH: Where'd they send you?

JH: Well, sent me first to Salt Lake City. I was drafted in Butte. I was working in Butte, and they sent me first to Salt Lake City and then took some tests and things and wound up going to Camp Roberts, California, out near (inaudible) for my basic training.

MH: When did you get to the 45th Infantry?

JH: About—let's see, we had three months basic training. I think I got there in November, I believe it was. I was there by Thanksgiving.

MH: This is November of what year? Forty—

JH: Of forty-two [1942].

MH: Forty-two [1942], okay. So, you went overseas with the 45th?

JH: Yeah.

MH: Where'd you go first?

JH: Well, we went to North Africa. And then, we didn't fight in North Africa, we took so many days going across. We got our land legs, so we did a lot of marching and maneuvering in North Africa for a few days. Had a practice landing against the 36th

[Infantry] Division one time, and we were just getting ready to go invade Sicily. I guess the only time I ever saw General [George S.] Patton was when we had that practice landing with the 36th Division. I happened to be sitting on a curb in some little town there, and he went back in the command car, so that was my only chance to see General Patton.

MH: That was where?

JH: That was in North Africa.

MH: In North Africa, okay. You were in the invasion of Italy [July to August 1943]?

JH: Sicily, yeah. I was second wave going into Sicily.

MH: You were a rifleman?

JH: Yeah. Well, I was a mortar man.

MH: Mortar man, okay. And what was your rank at that time?

JH: PFC [private first class]. I made PFC.

MH: After Sicily, what happens?

JH: Well, after Sicily, we invaded Italy and went to Salerno. That was in September, I think, maybe.

MH: You got the full European tour, didn't you?

JH: Yeah, oh, yeah, I had the whole tour. I went all the way with the outfit.

MH: So, you go through Italy, and then what? Then you regroup and invade France?

JH: Southern France, yeah. We were up in the winter line, first, in Italy, in the mountains up there around Cassino, and we were in the town of Venafro. We were above the town of Venafro. Then we went to the Anzio Beachhead, and we got clobbered pretty bad at Anzio, and then we finally broke out from that and went to Rome and helped take Rome. Then they decided they were going to send us to southern France, so we went back down to Salerno and did some amphibious maneuvers and made the landing in southern France. I think—what year was that? It was forty-three [1943], I guess.

MH: Forty-three [1943] or early forty-four [1944]?

JH: I think it might've been—I'm trying to think what month that was.

MH: I can find it in the books that I've got.

JH: Yeah, okay.

MH: Now you're in southern France. Then what happens?

JH: Well, we went from southern France, we went up along the Swiss border there, really in—in fact, that's kind of a vacation area there, I think, in France. We were just marching up there, and we didn't have much opposition there. The landing time, and then they moved us inland into the Vosges Mountains. And we got up in the mountains, there in the forests and all that kind of stuff, and we eventually got through the Siegfried Line.

I should say, first of all, that I got a lucky break there. They took me off the line and assigned me a job in the regimental headquarters working on the history of the regiment. I started the history of the regiment, and we wound up, finally, with a book. So, I can't put myself forth as fighting on the lines the whole time. But I was with everybody, anyhow.

MH: Tell me about getting into Germany.

JH: Yeah. Well, see, we—gosh, I can't remember the months. But we crossed the Siegfried Line—I'm not sure what month that was—and we were up in a place called Niederbronn [les-Bains] in Alsace-Lorraine, and that was when the Germans created the Bulge. And they brought us back a lot of miles, because the Germans made a heck of an impact. They brought us back out of Niederbronn, and we went down there down near

Reipertswiller, where we got into a heck of a big firefight and lost a battalion there, and had to rejuvenate, to fill up that battalion, and take off again.

So, let's see, I'm trying to think. Oh, we went into a town called Scharfenberg, fought in there, and then we helped take Nuremberg. And then we—let's see, Nuremberg, then we came to—well, it was after Nuremberg that we ran into Dachau.

MH: Okay, let's slow down the story at this point, and tell me what do you know about concentration camps at that point?

JH: Not a darned thing.

MH: How do you stumble across this place?

JH: We just happened to be in the sector where we were assigned, and they had told us that day that we were going to see something we never expected to see again, never expected to see. So, we didn't know what we were looking for. But anyhow, the troops headed out, and we're going along some railroad tracks. We came along and hit Dachau. About thirty-nine carloads of dead people in those trains, in that train. It was open cars, you know. They had been transferred from other camps, and they were bringing them in to Dachau, I guess, to cremate them. But they never did get any of that done.

MH: What goes through your mind when you see something like that?

JH: When we first saw that?

MH: Yeah.

JH: Well, everybody was really shocked. We'd seen lots of death, but we hadn't seen anything like that. Bodies all piled up and people skinned down to nothing, and starving to death and all that. And we had a lot of emotion erupted there. We had not only—well, they wanted to get in and shoot anything that walked. But it was difficult to find anything to shoot, because they had some people in the towers, still, but the SS troops that were in charge of Dachau had fled, and they weren't there.

MH: So, the initial reaction is anger?

JH: Well, there was anger first of all, and there were a lot of tears and a lot of throwing up, and a little of everything: a terribly emotional experience.

MH: Even for guys who'd been in war for, in your case, almost three years.

JH: Yeah, even that. It was such a shock. It was just a terrible shock to see, well, to see all those people starved down. There were some dead out in the field and some died while we were there. We were there one full day.

MH: What battalion were you in?

JH: I was working in Headquarters Company then, but I had access to a Jeep, so I went in with the troops.

MH: Tell me about that. Was Lieutenant Colonel Sparks the CO [commanding officer] in charge at the time?

JH: Yeah, Felix Sparks, he was the 3rd Battalion commander; he was in charge of the operation there.

MH: Were you anywhere near him?

JH: Yeah. Well, I was right with the troops. We went in and—

MH: So, you drove a Jeep in.

JH: Yeah, I rode in the Jeep, and I think we had one incident on the wall that I saw the results of that incident, anyhow. They gunned down some—what they did, they had taken some of these people out of the hospital that had been attendants in the hospital, and they'd lined them up against the wall. Bill Walsh, the I Company commander, put a machine gunner down there and with instructions not to fire unless they were attacked, and they [the Germans] attacked him.

So then, Sparks and the rest of them were heading down the road, there, and all of a sudden, the machine gun cut loose. Sparks came rushing back and kicked the kid off the machine gun, and the machine gunner said to him, “Well, sir, they were going to attack me,” and he said, “They weren’t going to attack you.” So, I guess they killed about—I suppose, nine or ten there, I imagine.

MH: Were you there when that happened?

JH: I just came in right after that.

MH: Did you see Sparks kick the guy off the gun?

JH: No, I didn’t see that, but I saw all these guys struggling to get up and all that kind of stuff. And then, no. A lot of the stuff that happened with Sparks happened up by the front gate up there, when he ran into the 42nd Infantry Division, so I missed a lot of that stuff.

MH: What did you see inside the camp?

JH: Well, I saw that thing in the coal yard there, where they gunned down those people. I saw some of these captives there, the people they captured, Germans. I saw some of the German prisoners attacking their former captors, you know.

MH: Where did that take place?

JH: Right out in the fields out there, behind the fence.

MH: What did you see?

JH: Well, they were—I wasn’t sure what I was seeing half the time, but they killed some of the captor—some of the Germans, and they killed some of what they called kapos, I think. Those are people who had special treatment by selling themselves out to the Germans.

MH: How were they killing these people?

JH: Oh, they killed them with their hands, and they killed them with shovels. They threw them down in a stream that was running through there, and they were just—boy, they were furious. They were hard to stop.

MH: There's a lot of screaming and yelling while this is going on?

JH: Yeah, quite a little. Yeah, that was right. Then, of course, they realized that we were Americans, we were liberating them, and boy, they got along the fence and shouted and yelled. They were pretty happy to see us.

MH: Did you talk to any of those people?

JH: I didn't, until the next day. I got assigned to take a *Life* magazine photographer and a woman—I think from *Ladies Home Journal*; I've always thought that was who she wrote for—and put them in a Jeep and drove into the enclosure. That was the first I was able to get into the enclosure. We were instructed not to go into the enclosure, but we got in there.

MH: Wait a second. The stuff where you saw the prisoners killing the kapos, you hadn't driven in at that point?

JH: No, uh-uh.

MH: But you were inside the main gate but not inside the prisoner enclosure?

JH: That's right, I wasn't in the enclosure.

MH: Okay, got it. So, now, go ahead. This is the next day and you're driving a Jeep in.

JH: Took them inside the enclosure, and the people just surrounded the Jeep. I don't know, I couldn't talk to anybody, because I didn't know the language. The Jews all had the Star of David on them and all that sort of thing. But by God if they didn't get some pencils somewhere, and they had little pieces of paper, and they were asking me for my autograph. They were more interested in the uniform, I think, than they were in the

photographers, so I was signing my name and my hometown and that kind of stuff. Never knew what they ever did with that, but they were anxious to do that.

MH: Was the photographer or the reporter Margaret Bourke-White?

JH: No, it wasn't Margaret Bourke-White. In fact, I don't know what his name was, the *Life* photographer. I think the woman who was involved in the ruckus between the 42nd Division and our outfit was Marguerite Higgins.

MH: Right. Yeah, that story I've heard.

JH: I'd like to have met her. She was kind of cute, I guess.

MH: I see. (laughs) You'd been at war for a while.

JH: Right. (laughs)

MH: Yeah. Tell me about the second day, though, where you're going in in the Jeep with the photographer. What do you see then?

JH: Well, then the people told us various things to see. In fact, the first day I was in there—I'm trying to think; maybe it was the second day. Anyhow, went into where they had gassed some of those people after they'd killed them. They were going to give them a bath or something, you know, and they'd put the naked bodies stacked up, oh, halfway up the wall in this big room. I saw all that, and I saw where the prisoners had barracked down, where they had the barracks.

MH: What did those look like?

JH: Well, they were just old buildings, kind of beat up old buildings, and they'd had too many people in there for a long, long time. They were just kind of a shambles, for the most part. Saw where—well, I guess they called it "the killing fields" or something out there. They used dogs and—oh, heck, they used everything.

MH: Did you go into any of the other buildings where they'd been conducting experiments?

JH: No, I didn't. The prisoners all warned us against certain buildings, because they had typhoid fever in there, and they said you'd get sick. So, I didn't go into any experimental buildings or anything.

MH: Was there physical contact between you and the prisoners? Did they try and hug you?

JH: Oh, yeah. The second day, yeah, they were all over me. They wanted to shake my hand and wanted me to sign my name and that sort of thing. Yeah. Those people, they weren't as bad off as some of those who had been in longer. They were—they still had a little life in them in there.

MH: Does the positive reaction you got from the prisoners on the second day help wipe out the images of the train on the first day?

JH: Well, I suppose—yeah, I suppose it did. You can always visualize that train any time you want to think about it, though. God, that was a terrible thing to see.

MH: What about the images in your mind of these people who couldn't do enough to thank you?

JH: Well, yeah. Well, you just carried that with you. It was terrible, and we went on. The next day, we went on to Munich and helped capture Munich, so actually our being in there a few hours, not any long time. I went back down from Munich a couple times to see the camp.

MH: What made you do that?

JH: Curiosity, I guess, and I had access to a Jeep. I got promoted to being an officer.

MH: To being an officer?

JH: Well, they promoted me to warrant officer when they started—when the war was ending. There were vacancies there, so they made an officer out of me the last part of the war.

MH: How'd you like that?

JH: Well, I liked that fine. (laughs)

MH: The food get any better?

JH: Huh?

MH: Did the food get any better?

JH: Well, we had pretty good food all the time. I don't know that the food got any better, but the activities got better, because they had some shows and things that the officers were able to see; the enlisted men, you couldn't. We had captured a liquor warehouse in Scharfenberg, and, boy, we had liquor running out of our ears. We took that liquor and put it in the trucks and buried it (laughs) before Eisenhower shut down the liquor warehouse. So, once he shut it down, we had most of the liquor. We had a lot of liquor in those late days.

MH: And you shared it with the enlisted men?

JH: Oh, yeah. Gosh, yes.

MH: Okay, just checking. Tell me, what you did you see when you went back to Dachau those couple of times that you didn't see the first time?

JH: Well, I hadn't thought too much about that. We ran into a Frenchman and a—with a Russian gal, I guess just shacking up. I guess. I don't know. But we talked to those folks a little bit, and she gave me a picture of herself, with a fur hat on her head and all that stuff. It was kind of a friendly kind of a thing. The camp, I guess—had to be about that time, I suppose—had all the health authorities in there, the Red Cross and our own medics and all that, trying to retrieve these people who could be retrieved. Well, some of them, you couldn't feed them. Some of them died if you'd feed them rations and things like that,

and so we were told not to give them any rations. But some guys did. Anyhow, that's not a very good story for you. Anyhow, I remember that part going down there was kind of an enjoyable experience when I got to meet that Russian woman.

MH: What else did you see in the camp? Did they take you around?

JH: I just saw the camp. A lot of old buildings, and they had a big space out there. And we went into one of the buildings, and that's where we found some of these people living at that time.

MH: You mean they hadn't come out even the first day?

JH: No, people had moved in, I think, kind of—they weren't necessarily—they weren't former prisoners or anything, just people moving in to find a—what do we call those people?

MH: DPs?

JH: Displaced persons or something.

MH: Right, yeah. Did you see any kids in the camp?

JH: Any kids?

MH: Yeah.

JH: I didn't see any kids.

MH: Okay. But there were men and women.

JH: Yeah. Well, there were—yeah, mostly men. They eliminated a lot of women, those Germans did, in those camps.

MH: When did you finally get back to the States?

JH: Oh, let's see. They brought me back—gee, I'm bad on that. I don't know exactly.

MH: When did you get out of the Army?

JH: I got out of the Army in December of forty—

MH: Forty-five [1945]?

JH: Five [1945], yeah.

MH: You went back home to Colorado?

JH: I went back home to Missoula, Montana.

MH: To Missoula, Montana. What'd you do up there?

JH: I managed to get a job. I had a degree in journalism from the University of Montana. I managed to get a job on the *Great Falls Montana Tribune*, so I worked for the *Tribune* there several years.

MH: Now I understand why they made you write the regimental journal.

JH: That was how I got that job, because the executive officer one day said, "It looks like a long war for us. We better get somebody writing the history. Who can write a history?" So they dug into the personnel files, and they found out that I used to work for a newspaper a little bit and that I had a degree in journalism. They called me over and said, "How'd you like to take a whack at writing the history of the regiment?" I said, "Yeah, I'd like that better than carrying a mortar." So, they assigned me to the regimental headquarters.

MH: So, did you stay in the newspaper business?

JH: Oh, for quite a long—actually, my career has all had to do with writing, even after we—I wound up going to Helena, Montana, and I was an advertising director in Montana tourist trade. Then one of the governors [Donald Nutter] picked me up, and I traveled with him, and he got elected governor. Then he and five others were killed in a plane crash, so the lieutenant governor [Tim Babcock] got elevated to governor, and he said, “If I’m gonna be the governor, you’re going to be the executive secretary.” So, I wound up being the executive secretary to him for seven years.

MH: And then what happens?

JH: We lost in the election, and when you lose the election, you get fired, so I got fired. I managed to get a job in Washington, D.C., in the U.S. Travel Service. And then I also managed, finally, to get to—well, I had help from [Senator] Mike Mansfield and his staff; they were Montana people. I got a job with Senator Norris Cotton from New Hampshire and worked for him a couple years there. Then [I was] crying the blues about wanting to come back west, so he called me in one day and said, “You still want to go west?” I said, “Yeah.” He said, “Well, they’re forming an Environmental Protection Agency office out in Denver and San Francisco, and I believe I can get you assigned there.” I said, “Well, Denver’s closer to Montana, so that’s where I’d like to go.” So, I wound up here in Denver, and I bounced around a couple agencies, but mostly I’ve been in Denver ever since.

MH: When did you retire?

JH: Oh, let’s see now. That was—they let me work till I was seventy-four, and I’m eighty-seven now. So, that would be how many years ago?

MH: Fourteen. So, that was what, 1994, I guess?

JH: Yeah, I think so, in ninety-four. I think that’s about right.

MH: Can you put your finger on any way that what you saw at Dachau affected your life later on, thirty, forty, fifty years later?

JH: Well, I guess, no. I guess just the fact that you’d seen a lot of death. And that had that impact, but I can’t really think of anything—I haven’t had nightmares or anything about Dachau. In fact, I went back, I guess, three years ago now. I guess it was the sixtieth

anniversary of the end of World War II or something, and they had a big ceremony in Dachau and Munich, and several of us went back over there and saw the—we were guests of the mission, I guess. We went back to Dachau, and they had a big ceremony one Sunday afternoon with about 6,000 former occupants in there. And that was—I guess that might be an impact there, because a lot of people thought we were liberators, and they wanted to thank us for liberating their father or uncle or something or other, and it got so you could see them coming to thank you, and I got all teary-eyed over that. It seemed like you were getting a lot of credit that maybe you didn't deserve. But they were so grateful and so hospitable; it was just a wonderful experience.

MH: Are you married?

JH: I was, yeah. I was married, and my wife died, let's see, in 2004.

MH: Sorry. Had you told her about Dachau?

JH: Oh, yeah. I told her. I've told my kids. In fact, I took my daughter with me on this trip three years ago, and yeah, I told them about it.

MH: There are a lot of GIs I interviewed who didn't tell their wives or kids about it. Some waited fifty years to tell them.

JH: I guess that's right. But I didn't. I wasn't trying to do a lot of bragging, but I certainly talked about it and having seen that camp and all the terrible things in there. I got to be a good friend of General Felix Sparks, and Celine. He died here recently. We'd been trying to get him a DSC [Distinguished Service Cross]. Haven't got it, haven't got it done yet, but at least they named a post office after him, so we had a ceremony there about a month ago. They named a post office after him. I know his wife and kids pretty well.

MH: What do you think of the argument between the 45th and the 42nd over who got there first?

JH: Oh, I'm sure we got there first. (laughs) We came in the back route, and we had to go all the way, forging our way up through what we were encountering, up to the gate up there, and the 42nd had come in at the gate. We were kind of surprised to see them there, I guess. But, anyhow, the general from the 42nd—Marguerite Higgins talked him into taking them down there, so I don't know. We've had that ruckus going for a long time.

MH: I've heard from a lot of people, and frankly, most of the camps that were liberated, there was no shooting. The serious SS people had fled before the Americans got there.

JH: Right.

MH: And I find it—and the way they've set up the notion of who liberated a camp, if you were part of the division, and a squad from that division got to the camp, the whole division gets to call itself “liberators.”

JH: Yeah, sure.

MH: And it sort of bothers me that—the guys who died in the surf at Omaha Beach were as much liberators as guys who got to a lot of the camps.

JH: Oh, heck, yes.

MH: I just have the feeling that that's getting lost in the process.

JH: It may be. Yeah, we had—we did a little shooting, but not a whole lot. But, in fact, we had a couple bad incidents there: the one on the wall; and then, well, we took out some of the guys in the towers who started shooting down at us a little bit, so we got that. And then, let's see, the other shooting. What was some other shooting we had? Oh, Sparks—not Sparks, but Walsh—took a guy, about four of those German prisoners, and gunned them down in a railroad car. They had him up for murder for a while, but nothing really came of it. But he was court-martialed. He kind of went crazy, and Sparks took him off the command, even, and he was—I guess he was crying and a whole bunch of things, and then Sparks gave him back his command of I Company. So, that incident occurred, anyhow.

Sparks also had a court-martial to go through, because he had been the commander of the troops, and these things had happened to these captured prisoners, but he had—you probably have the story. When he saw Patton, Patton said, “You've been a good soldier, Sparks. I'll show you what I'm going to do with this court-martial,” and he tore it up and threw it in the wastebasket, and he said, “You go home.”

MH: For a long time, people didn't know whether that had to do with the shooting or whether that had to do with the incident with General [Henning] Linden.

JH: Well, it might have been—Linden threatened a court-martial, and I don't know exactly which way that was, but it seemed to me that, more than the Linden incident, it was the fact that he had command of the troops, so he had to explain why some of these captured prisoners got killed.

MH: I've probably interviewed over 100 guys by now, from various units who were at various camps. Initially, I was surprised—although it no longer surprises me—how guys said after they'd seen some of the camps—in fact, after they heard about Malmédy with the Germans massacred all those prisoners. But they said after they'd seen what the Germans had done to the camps—you know, the guy would say, “We didn't take any prisoners for that week.”

JH: Oh, I suppose they didn't. I imagine they didn't in Malmédy. That was so awful. That was in another sector.

MH: But I'm amazed how many guys have said to me, “After we saw what the Germans did, we didn't take any prisoners; we shot them.”

JH: Oh, well, we didn't do that. We took a lot of prisoners. I think the only time I know of our shooting anybody was there in Dachau.

MH: One other question: do you have a photo of yourself from World War II?

JH: Yeah, I do. In fact, it's kind of a nice photo. (laughs) Makes me handsome, more handsome than I am.

MH: Were you in combat gear?

JH: Yeah, combat—no, it wasn't combat gear. They sent me to Rome for a rest or something. I don't know why I needed a rest, but it's in my uniform, anyhow.

MH: Okay. Is it possible for me to borrow that and then scan it and send it back to you?

JH: Oh, sure.

MH: And also to get a current picture of you?

JH: Yeah, sure. I'll be glad to do that. I'll send it to you.

MH: Okay. Do you have an email address?

JH: I don't have, no.

MH: You don't have? Why don't I mail you an envelope that you can send it to me in, and then I'll scan it and send it back to you?

JH: I'll be glad to do that.

MH: Okay....

JH: Right.

MH: Okay.

JH: Anything else I think of that I have found around, I'll have to—

MH: If there's anything you think of, please give me a call.

JH: Oh, sure. Are you going to give me your—

MH: I'll send you the phone number and everything in the—

JH: Okay, that's great.

MH: Thank you very much, sir. I really appreciate your time.

JH: Well, that's awfully nice of you to do that. And we're having a regimental reunion in Oklahoma City at the end of this month, so I'm kind of getting back into the military here at the moment.

MH: In Oklahoma City?

JH: Yeah.

MH: Who's in charge of that?

JH: Well, I'm the president of the regiment. We're meeting with the 179th Infantry there and also divisions, so the division is doing more of it than we are as a regiment.

MH: How many World War II vets do you think will be there?

JH: With the 179th and 157th together, I haven't any idea. Probably about seventy-five.

MH: If I send you some flyers, could you just put them out at the reunion? Asking—

JH: Sure.

MH: Okay, I'll send them to you. They're just telling people what I'm doing, and asking them to contact me if they were at Dachau or any of the other camps.

JH: Oh, be glad to do that.

MH: Okay, I'll have those printed—and what's the date of the reunion?

JH: The date is [September] 24 to [September] 28.

MH: Okay. Well, I'll get them to you in the next week.

JH: Yeah, that's great.

MH: Thank you very much, Mr. Hallowell.

JH: Your name is Mike, is it?

MH: Mike Hirsh, H-i-r-s-h.

JH: Okay.

MH: I was in—I had been a journalist before I got drafted for Vietnam. First they made me the editor of the newspaper at Fort Sheridan, and then they were putting together small public information detachments, five man units, and I was in the first of those units to go to Vietnam.

JH: Wow!

MH: So, I was a combat correspondent with the 25th Infantry Division there.

JH: Oh, wow. You had yourself a time.

MH: Yes, but nothing like you guys had. I mean, you know, I was there for under a year. You lived it for about thirty years, I think.

JH: Yeah, twenty-nine months, I think.

MH: Yeah, long time. So, okay. Thank you very much Mr. Hallowell. I really appreciate your time.

JH: Well, I appreciate you, too. Thank you, Mike.

MH: Okay. Bye-bye.

JH: Bye.

End of interview