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Thomas E. Harvey oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, November 1, 2008

Thomas E. Harvey (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?

Thomas Harvey: My what?

MH: Give me your name and spell it.

TH: Oh, Thomas, T-h-o-m-a-s, E. Harvey, H-a-r-v-e-y.

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

TH: Right.

MH: And your phone number is....

TH: That's the cell phone. My house number is....

MH: Okay. What's your date of birth, sir?

TH: May 1, 1922.

MH: Okay. Where were you before you went into the army?

TH: I lived at Stockbridge, Georgia.

MH: And what were you doing?

TH: Well, I was driving a truck, hauling gravel, building the—what's it called? Fort Gillem, it used to be, but they closed it up.

MH: Okay, and when did you go into the service?

TH: I went in October 15, 1942.

MH: Forty-two [1942]. And were you drafted, or did you enlist?

TH: I was drafted.

MH: Where'd they send you?

TH: Sent me to Camp Polk, Louisiana.

MH: In the free infantry basic training?

TH: Yeah, uh-huh.

MH: Okay, and how did you end up in the 11th Armored Division?

TH: Well, that's where I started at.

MH: Okay.

TH: They were in—they had like thirty or forty men when I got there. You still there?

MH: Yeah, I'm here. I hear you.

TH: Okay. There was about thirty to forty men when I got there, and then we built up to 200. Then they start checking our training.

MH: Okay. When did they finally send you overseas?

TH: I went over in September forty-four [1944].

MH: So, you landed where? September—

TH: We lived in—went to England first, Southampton, England.

MH: And then what?

TH: Then we went to Cherbourg, Germany—I mean, France. Cherbourg, France.

MH: Okay.

TH: When we got over there—that was in December, 15th of December. That's when they made the breakthrough at (inaudible), what they call the Battle of the Bulge.

MH: Okay.

TH: They sent us ashore there on a 500 mile chase (inaudible).

MH: Okay, and that was your first combat?

TH: Yeah.

MH: What was that like for you?

TH: It's hard to explain. It was twenty-five [degrees] below zero.

MH: Did you have winter clothes at that point, or still have summer clothes?

TH: That week we had OD [Olive Drab] clothes on.

MH: Okay, and so you were in the Battle of the Bulge.

TH: Oh, yeah.

MH: Were you wounded there?

TH: No, I got lots of hats right there, three of the guys got—lost their leg, their arms. They dropped the mortar in the half-track I'm driving.

MH: They dropped a mortar right into it?

TH: Yeah.

MH: You were with, what, the 21st Armored Infantry [Battalion]?

TH: That's right. Yeah.

MH: Okay. Then what happens to your unit after the Battle of the Bulge?

TH: Well, (inaudible) dag-gone-it! Hated this war with Germany.

MH: Okay.

TH: Then we went to Luxembourg where, you know, Russians left in bales in there, and then to Luxembourg, then we went into Germany. We crossed the Rhine River in Würms.

MH: Okay.

TH: Germany, and then went from there to—my old phone is cutting up on me. Went from there to Frankfurt, Germany and then went down into Czechoslovakia—tried to meet the Russians there. Then back to combat and then we went into Austria and that's where we run into the concentration camp, 'course my outfit (inaudible) captain too though, concentration camp.

MH: Which ones were those?

TH: Well, one of them—the one I was in; I wasn't there with the group that captured the first one [in] Germany. The one I was in was in Austria, Linz, Austria.

MH: Okay, and which camp was that?

TH: That's—they called it the Mudhousen [*sic*].¹

MH: Mauthausen?

TH: Mud. Mudhousen.

MH: Mudhousen?

TH: Uh-huh.

¹ TH is referring to Mauthausen concentration camp, located just outside of Linz, Austria.

MH: Okay, tell me what that experience was like. How did it happen? What did you see?

TH: What was in the camp?

MH: Yeah. When'd you come across it?

TH: I don't remember the date. It was right near the end of the war.

MH: Okay, that was May 5 or May 6.

TH: Uh—

MH: That's what they have you down for.

TH: It was something more along like that.

MH: Okay.

TH: Kind of hard to remember that after this many years.

MH: Right, tell me what you saw.

TH: Oh, a lot of dead people. They was just piled up like cordwood, thousands and thousands of them. They had burning pits there to burn them. The Germans, they had a rock quarry there, too. They'd make 'em jump; if it didn't kill them when they jumped, someone'd go down and shoot them.

MH: The prisoners told you that?

TH: Huh?

MH: The prisoners told you about that?

TH: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. And engineers, they'd come in behind us, and they just dug trenches with the bulldozers and laid them, and then buried and covered them up.

MH: How do you deal with seeing thousands and thousands of bodies like that?

TH: Digging the graves, that was rough. Something a lot of people don't want to see and don't like to talk about it, but—

MH: Right.

TH: But that was rough.

MH: Yeah. Do you talk about it amongst the guys when you're there? Or do you just sort of look at it?

TH: We just looked at it. We got people from all around there—we showed them what was going on there—the engineers coming covering them up, you know? Moving them. They hauled them on two horse wagons out of there, just like cordwood stacked on them.

MH: Huh. And, of course, nobody had ever seen a sight like that.

TH: No. I'd say—I don't got his number right now, but Raymond Bush, he lives up north. He was in the engineers that helped clean them up down there, and he made a movie of that. Did you hear about that?

MH: No, I didn't.

TH: Yeah, he made a movie about it, and he sells it for twenty dollars apiece. It's a video.

MH: Okay.

TH: Name is Raymond Bush. He's in the—I believe the 56th Engineers [56th Armored Engineer Battalion].

MH: Okay. The 56th Engineers?

TH: I think that's what he was in.

MH: Okay.

TH: Have you got a book on it?

MH: No, I don't. I mean, I have books about Mauthausen, but I don't have a book about
—

TH: Was you at it?

MH: No, I was in Vietnam.

TH: Oh, were you?

MH: Yeah, I'm a little bit younger. I'm sixty-five.

TH: (inaudible)

MH: How long did you spend in Mauthausen?

TH: Oh, me?

MH: Yes.

TH: I didn't stay there too long, I guess. But when we went in there, we was in the halftracks and tanks outside, and we were only about three or four miles beyond that.

We'd done cleared that out, with the engineers coming behind us, taking care of them. But we had a chance to go back and see what was all going on, you know.

MH: Yeah. Tell me what you saw when you went back.

TH: Well, the people were piled up just like they were when we come through there. They wanted, you know, all the people that could [to] see it, see what it was about.

MH: Right.

TH: They haul people that were horrified around the front to see it.

MH: What—

TH: (inaudible) the Germans made them look at them.

MH: And, of course, the Germans said they didn't know any of this had been happening.

TH: Yeah, they didn't know. They acted like they did.

MH: Right.

TH: Lot of people around the people close around it, and they go like they didn't know nothing about it.

MH: Like they couldn't smell it.

TH: Yeah.

MH: Were there still live prisoners there?

TH: Oh, yeah. There was some live prisoners, but they were so poor they couldn't hardly walk.

MH: Did you talk with any of them?

TH: Naw, 'cause I couldn't speak their language.

MH: I see. Where you there when the—when our medics came in to help them?

TH: No, no. I wasn't there when they come in.

MH: Okay. Before you got to Mauthausen, did anybody tell you about these concentration camps? Did you know about them?

TH: Nothing, other than we was up by—I guess maybe a hundred miles from them in Cham. Cham, Germany, that's where we was at.

MH: In Cham, C-h-a-m.

TH: Yes.

MH: Yeah. And—

TH: They heard that—that's what they said. They heard this German was killing a lot of prisoners down there, and they sent us through Normandy down in there to get 'em, to capture the camp.

MH: Okay.

TH: We had to go into Austria, out of Germany and lost; of course, we went too far. We'd done made it back down into Czechoslovakia there and backed us back onto the road.

MH: Right.

TH: That we was supposed to have been on.

MH: When you got there, were the German soldiers gone? The SS were gone?

TH: No, there were some of them still around.

MH: So, was there shooting?

TH: Yeah. They were giving themselves up; there wasn't too much shooting going on there.

MH: When they gave themselves up, were you guys taking prisoners, or not taking prisoners?

TH: No, we was taking prisoners.

MH: Okay. Did you know Captain Fabrick? Does that name ring a bell?

TH: Captured Captain (inaudible)?

MH: Fabric. Elmore Fabrick.

TH: Elmore? Yeah, that was my commanding officer.

MH: He was your commanding officer?

TH: Uh-huh.

MH: It was his daughter that gave me your name.

TH: Oh, was it? Okay.

MH: Yeah. What kind of guy was he?

TH: Oh, he was one of the best men that I'd ever want to know.

MH: What made him so good?

TH: Well, he's just good to all the men. He'd never tell somebody to do this—they always wanted somebody to volunteer and go out with him, you know, on patrol and stuff and stuff like. And he was right up there on the front line with all of us.

MH: So, he's a good officer—

TH: Oh, yeah.

MH: Good commander.

TH: Yeah, he's a fine fella—he passed away here, you know, last year, or the year before last one.

MH: Yeah.

TH: Lived in Aiken, South Carolina.

MH: Right. When you left Mauthausen, did you come to any other camps? Or did you see any of the death marches on the roads?

TH: No. We'd seen death marches in Cham.

MH: Tell me about that, would you?

TH: It was just a whole row full of prisoners, and they're starving to death and they're crying. And when we liberated them they just scattered and went everywhere, every direction: they were trying to find something to eat and everything.

MH: What did the SS do?

TH: Well, they fled through the woods, and some of them got away and some didn't.

MH: Could you tell where those prisoners were coming from, or where they were trying to make them walk to?

TH: No, they couldn't find out where they come from.

MH: How many do you think were in that death march at Cham?

TH: Oh, not sure; ten thousand or more.

MH: Really? So, they did really cover the whole road.

TH: Oh, they covered the whole road, yeah.

MH: And you came up behind them?

TH: No, we met them head on.

MH: Huh. And you were in a halftrack, right?

TH: Yeah.

MH: So, you're coming up the road and you see—I mean, from a distance, you have to see what's looking like an army marching towards you.

TH: Yeah, this long line of people walking side—and some of them falling dead. Some of them passing out, you know, just couldn't make it no further.

MH: And did shooting break out right away?

TH: Well, there wasn't much shooting going on there. They didn't have too many SS troops, and there wasn't much fight left in them.

MH: Yeah. So, what do you do with all these prisoners? With all these—

TH: Well, nothing we could do, except we just got on the side of the road and passed them all up.

MH: Were they wearing the striped uniforms?

TH: Some of them were.

MH: Yeah? Men and women?

TH: Oh, yeah.

MH: Yeah. What goes through your mind when you see something like that? I mean, you were what, twenty-two years—yeah, you were about twenty-three years old.

TH: Yeah.

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

TH: Oh, forgot about it. Just makes you feel lucky, you know, makes you stand tall, stuff like that.

MH: Yeah.

TH: Something like that. Makes you a little madder, too.

MH: Right. Were you a religious person?

TH: Well, you know, had to be to be all right. (laughs)

MH: Yeah.

TH: Yeah

MH: But how do you deal with, you know, with God when you see the kinds of horrors you saw over there?

TH: Well, that's still a hard question to ask us. When you see something you've got to do, you just go ahead and do it. It's either you or them, so it's better to be them than you.

MH: That I understand, but how do you deal with God—I mean, do you ever say, “How does God let something like that happen?” Like the camps, like the death marches—

TH: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

MH: You ever come up with an answer?

TH: No, never could. I never heard of anyone else coming up with one.

MH: Right. When you came home, did you tell people about those things you had seen?

TH: Uh, sometimes we'd talk about it a little bit, but they don't believe it.

MH: They don't believe it? I mean, how does that make you feel when you know you've seen this and people say it couldn't be?

TH: You know a lot; didn't say a lot.

MH: Yeah. Did you tell your—you got married, right?

TH: Yeah.

MH: Did you ever tell your wife about that stuff?

TH: Sometimes I talk a little about it.

MH: Yeah. Did any of that give you nightmares?

TH: Oh, it pops into my mind now lots, you know: every day, just about.

MH: Even today?

TH: Yeah.

MH: Why do you think that is, that you can't forget it after all these years?

TH: It's just something you've got in your brain, and you can't get it out.

MH: Yeah. When did you finally come home from the war?

TH: I got home December 9 of 1945.

MH: And you got out of the army, and back in Georgia?

TH: Yeah. I went back to Alabama, went to Alabama and then went back to Fort (inaudible), and was discharged on March 17, 1945.

MH: March 17, 1946?

TH: Yeah, March of forty-six [1946].

MH: Forty-six [1946]. And, so, what did you do as a career or job for the rest of your life?

TH: Well, I went to work—oh, I got a lot of lawn out there. I took (inaudible).

MH: Right.

TH: It's a 52/20. I could make more money staying at home going at twenty dollars a week than working back then, because I wasn't making nothing.

MH: That was the mustering out pay that they gave you because there were no jobs?

TH: Yeah.

MH: Yeah.

TH: And I took it, and then skirted around from one thing to another. I went to work with the civil service (inaudible) back then, and then Fort (inaudible).

MH: Uh-huh.

TH: I worked there till sixty-four [1964]. Then I went in—when I left there, I went into construction work.

MH: Okay, and when'd you retire from that?

TH: I retired in seventy-five [1975].

MH: Okay. When'd you get into the—what do you have, a campgrounds?

TH: Yeah, I got that in ninety-nine [1999].

MH: What—

TH: I quit construction and just put in—well, what it is, I bought me a place in the mountains and start building the campsite for my family, and first thing you know I had one big enough for four or five families.

MH: Uh-huh.

TH: (inaudible), four to three campsites, it's a small—

MH: Where is Hiawassee, Georgia?

TH: Where is it?

MH: Yeah.

TH: It's are you familiar with Gainesville, Georgia?

MH: No, I'm not. Are you—in relation to Atlanta or Macon or Valdosta, where are you?

TH: Oh, I'm up in—I'm within five miles of North Carolina

MH: Oh, okay.

TH: I'm up there in the north, northeast Georgia.

MH: Okay. The closest I ever got to there, I think, was Big Canoe.

TH: Big Canoe?

MH: Yeah. That's about two hours north of Atlanta, I think.

TH: Yeah.

MH: Yeah. Do you know any other vets who are still around, from your unit?

TH: Not really; you don't see them much anymore.

MH: Right. Okay, my last question is, do you have any—a picture of yourself from World War II? Hello?

End of interview.