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Tom Malan oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, September 5, 2008

Tom Malan (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: Okay, can you give me your name again and spell it for me, please?

Tom Malan: Tom Malan, M-a-l-a-n.

MH: And your address?

TM: ...

MH: And your phone is....

TM: Right.

MH: And your date of birth, sir.

TM: August—(laughs) you're gettin' personal now—August 16, 1921.

MH: So you're how old?

TM: I will be eighty-seven in August.

MH: Okay. You've got a great voice. Have you ever been on the radio?

TM: Uh, no.

MH: You have one of those radio kind of voices that just resonates.

TM: Is that right?

MH: Yep. So, where did you grow up?

TM: In southern Illinois.

MH: Whereabouts?

TM: Centralia, Illinois.

MH: Okay, and how old were you when you went in the service?

TM: I was about—thirty-nine [1939], forty-three[1943]—I was about twenty-two, twenty-three.

MH: So what were you doing before you went in?

TM: Well, I lost my father—he was forty-years old—so I got a deferment or two. But I was working in the oil fields around there when I was called in.

MH: Okay, so then you got drafted?

TM: Yes.

MH: Where'd they send you?

TM: First one was to Camp Grant, Illinois.

MH: Okay, and how long were you there?

TM: For basic training, engineer basic training.

MH: Okay, and—I'm sorry, what year was that that they drafted you?

TM: Let's see, about forty-three [1943].

MH: Forty-three [1943], okay. So, the war had been going on for a couple of years, and you knew that you were going to get sent over.

TM: Not then yet, I didn't know.

MH: When did they tell you?

TM: A couple years later—a year later or so, a year and a half later, I guess.

MH: So, you were in engineering basic.

TM: I went from there to ASTP [Army Specialized Training Program].

MH: At what college?

TM: At Washington-Jefferson, Washington, Pennsylvania.

MH: And the promise was, if you go to that, you're going to get to stay there until you get out of college?

TM: No, no, no. That was just the Army program. And it was an engineer, and I'm no engineer. So then, I volunteered for cadets, then—Air Force cadets—and was stationed down in Jackson, Mississippi when they alerted us all for overseas shipment.

MH: And they sent you where, to the 63rd?

TM: Yes, uh-huh.

MH: And the 63rd was being put together—

TM: It was together. (lawnmower noises) Let me close this door so you can—

MH: Okay.

TM: My Mexican lawnmowers are here.

MH: I see.

TM: (both laugh) That's better, isn't it?

MH: Yes.

TM: Okay.

MH: So, they send you to the 63rd, which was where?

TM: At Centerville, Mississippi.

MH: And how long did you get to stay there?

TM: Well, until we went overseas. I was supposed to go to OCS [Officer Candidate School], but this came up first—the overseas first.

MH: And they sent overseas—they sent you by ship—where'd you leave from?

TM: Yes, we left New York. Camp Shanks, New York.

MH: Sailing for where?

TM: We landed at Marseille, France.

MH: And then what happens to you?

TM: Well, we were headed—on New Year's Eve that year, we were headed up to the Bulge when they broke through down at Colmar, so they called us back.

MH: You were riding in boxcars?

TM: No, no. Trucks—big trucks, what'd they call 'em?

MH: Deuce-and-a-halves?

TM: What's that?

MH: Deuce-and-a-halves? Two and a half ton trucks?

TM: Yeah.

MH: And so they called you back.

TM: Yeah, in the morning. They broke through down at Colmar, which is down in the southern part of Germany, you know [*sic*].¹

MH: And then what happens to you?

TM: Well, we finally went on line then and stayed on line till we leave this prisoner of war camp, and then we were done.

MH: What was your first combat?

TM: My first stop in combat?

MH: Yeah what was your first, you know, action that you saw?

TM: Well, I guess in the French Maginot Line.

MH: And what was that experience like? Were you prepared for it, or—?

TM: Got prepared pretty fast.

MH: (laughs) You were what, a rifleman at that point?

TM: No, I was a mortarman, 60mm mortar. Which is—we were a rifleman a lot of times.

MH: But you said 60mm mortar?

TM: Yes.

MH: You remember the first time you had to fire that thing in combat?

TM: No, I don't, Mike. At this age, you know.

¹ Colmar is actually in France, a little over twelve miles from the German border.

MH: That's a few years ago. So, tell me how you came across the concentration camp.

TM: Well, we fought our way through, and one morning, we took that concentration camp—we were headed for Munich, you know. It's a suburb of Munich. And—

MH: What did you see? Hello? Hello? (static sounds) Hello?

TM: —of bread, about the end of my finger.

MH: Start again, because something disconnected us. I was asking you what you saw—

TM: Well, we got in this town, and we got to the camp and we liberated it. And I never will forget, I ran across a Jewish fellow. I gave him a piece of bread. All he could eat at one time was a little piece, about the size of the end of my finger, because he'd been—he was thin and been starving. Now, the ones that were left in the camp, they burnt the buildings as they could. They were burnt from the neck on down. They tried to dig out underneath, you know, underneath the buildings. And they didn't make it; many of them did not make it.

MH: So, you mean these were people who were locked in buildings, and the buildings were set on fire?

TM: That's right.

MH: Were the buildings still burning when you got there?

TM: Some of them were, yes.

MH: So, what do you do?

TM: Well, do what we can—I mean, there wasn't many prisoners; the Germans had taken off, and taken care of the Jewish people that were in there.

MH: How many did you find alive?

TM: I don't remember.

MH: But you said they'd tried to crawl out from underneath the buildings?

TM: Yes, uh-huh. Dig their way out, you know. And they just didn't make it, many of them didn't.

MH: And I'm sorry to ask you this again, but they were burned which way?

TM: Well, from their neck on down—or depending on how far they got out, you know. Maybe from their waist on down.

MH: And you had to walk through these bodies?

TM: That's right.

MH: How do you deal with that?

TM: (laughs) That's hard. That's hard. Just try to get through as fast as you can, you know.

MH: Do you remember the smell?

TM: Oh, yeah. Yes, sure do.

MH: Can you describe it?

TM: I don't know how I would describe it, really. It was terrible—I mean, like dead bodies everywhere, you know.

MH: How do you react? I mean, do you cry, do you scream, do you want to kill somebody?

TM: No, no, you don't do either one if you're in combat or a GI, you know. Even though that Jewish fellow—you felt like crying, but you didn't.

MH: How did you know he was Jewish? He had a star on the—?

TM: I could tell by looking at him and what little English he could speak.

MH: So, what did you do with him?

TM: I just let him go. I mean, he went his way—on his way.

MH: When you got there, were the camp gates open?

TM: Yes.

MH: And were the survivors wandering out of the camp?

TM: Yes.

MH: Did you guys have any instructions?

TM: Not many, not many.

MH: And this was Landsberg?

TM: Landsberg, right.

MH: Landsberg; was it Kaufering, a sub-camp?

TM: Sub-camp of Auschwitz.

MH: Of Dachau.

TM: Dachau, right. Yeah, that's right.

MH: How long did you stay there at that camp?

TM: Oh, not very long: a day, maybe.

MH: But you sit in there—when you had a chance to talk to your buddies about it, what do you talk about? What are the conversations like?

TM: Oh, we never talked much about it, to be honest, because then the war was over for us. We went back to around Heidelberg, Germany, you know, and we never talked a whole lot about it; it was just part of war, you know.

MH: When you came home, did you tell people about it?

TM: Yes, when they asked. Right.

MH: I mean, those sights gotta stay with you the rest of your life.

TM: Oh, yes, yes.

MH: Do you have nightmares about them?

TM: No, no.

MH: But you just remember that they're there.

TM: That's right. I don't remember all of my Army career, but I remember that, all right. You know.

MH: Can you tell me anything else about that day that you were at the camp?

TM: No, I can't remember much about it, Mike.

MH: Did they bring medical people in to help those folks?

TM: Well, I'm sure they did. Our medical people helped them what they could. Because there was no fighting, we didn't fight any; none of our men were hurt.

MH: The SS had already gone.

TM: The SS had already gone.

MH: In the course of your time in combat, did you run into the SS often?

TM: Oh, yes. I can't say how often, but we did run into them.

MH: Did you treat the SS differently than the regular German army soldiers?

TM: (laughs) Yes.

MH: Tell me about that. I've heard some of it from some other people, too.

TM: Well, you didn't take all the prisoners in. You know. I never will forget we had a wonderful captain; he got his commission over in the Pacific. Captain Bob Young. And I brought in some wine—they said we were division reserve, and this was up in northern Germany—western Germany. And I ran into some wine. I was passin' it out and boy, I was gone. About three o'clock in the morning, they come to wake me up, and I had thrown up and layin' in it.

MH: Nice.

TM: I said, "Hey, we're division reserve." No, not anymore. So I was laying in the ditch that morning and Captain came by and said, "Hey, Handsome Tom, what's the matter?" I said, "You know everything that's going on in this company, Captain; I don't have to tell you." But anyway, that day, there was a ravine. We had to go up a big—I don't know what you'd call it; I'm not familiar with the mountain region when they'd have a plateau, I guess. And it was steep, and there was a ravine running down it, naturally. And our outfit—a couple of companies got held up over there, and Captain Young raised up and said, "Send me some help." He was going to go get it, that machine gunner. Well, the machine gunner got him right through the forehead. So, he had me do all his work before we went overseas while he was out with the troops; he called me in his office, and I stayed and he almost got to first sergeant. And he was a great guy. I went to see him, laid out the next day. He was dead, you know. He was piled up with the rest of 'em. And he was a great guy, like I said. He didn't get CMH [Congressional Medal of Honor], he got the next highest thing, which was the—

MH: Legion of Merit?

TM: Yes. Because he didn't know his value as a company commander, he led his company from the front instead of from the rear. Can you imagine that?

MH: I was in Vietnam, so I know what you're talking about.

TM: Right.

MH: So, when that sort of thing happens, you tend to get pissed off about things?

TM: Oh, yeah, we didn't take many prisoners that day. No.

MH: How'd you sort out the SS from the regular Wehrmacht soldiers?

TM: I don't recall offhand. Yeah.

MH: All right. Any other thoughts about the camp that you liberated? I'm trying to get a picture of these buildings on fire: how big were they?

TM: How big were they?

MH: Yeah.

TM: This lawnmower's right outside the window. (lawnmower noise)

MH: I can hear you okay, it's not a problem.

TM: Can you?

MH: Yeah.

TM: What was that question again?

MH: How—tell me about the size of the buildings that they burned

TM: Oh, they weren't very big—twenty by forty [feet] maybe.

MH: And did you go in them?

TM: Not any more than we had to.

MH: I mean, what'd you have to do? Break down the door?

TM: No, they were mostly open by then.

MH: And when you walk in the doorway, what do you see?

TM: Dead bodies. The live ones had got out.

MH: I mean, you see tens or dozens or hundreds?

TM: Well, it all depends on how many did not get out. You know. Dozens, maybe.

MH: Were they wearing uniforms or were they all burned off by then?

TM: Oh, no, they were POWs. Yeah.

MH: Anything else you can think of?

TM: Not offhand, Mike.

MH: Well, if anything else comes to mind—when did you finally get back home?

TM: March of forty-six [1946].

MH: So you stayed on occupation duty for a while?

TM: Yes.

MH: Or were you getting ready to go to Japan?

TM: No. I was on occupation—I played in a dance band for a while. Tony Bennett was our vocalist.

MH: Where?

TM: And then I got in the athletic end of it—my lips went bad. I played trumpet. So, I was referee, helped officiate football games all over Germany, spent two months down at the French Riviera, refereed one game down there. Then I came back and went home.

MH: What was the dance band you were in?

TM: It was the 255th [Regiment] Band was what we called it.

MH: And Tony Bennett was the vocalist?

TM: Right.

MH: Have you ever seen him since?

TM: Yes, four or five times.

MH: So you remember him singing in the Army?

TM: Oh, yeah, oh, yeah.

MH: That's pretty cool. So, did your lip ever get better?

TM: No. A friend of mine, I got down here in Houston and a friend of mine gave me a trumpet and said, "Go play it, Tom." Man, I couldn't get a tone out of it. 'Course, I got all dentures now and everything.

MH: So when you came back home, what'd you do?

TM: That's a good question. Little bit of everything for a while, because Shell Oil said I resigned instead of being taken by the Army. Well, I was surveying for Shell Oil. I had to go out of town—I wanted to stay—I knew when about I was leaving, and I wanted to stay home with my mother and brother and sisters, you know, but I couldn't fight it. So, I forget what my next job was, working in a bakery or something. And I finally ended up as a manufacturer's representative, traveling six states. Represented about seven or eight companies.

MH: Okay. And when did you retire?

TM: Eighty [1980], I guess it was, yeah.

MH: Nineteen eighty. Did you get married?

TM: Oh, yeah, I've been married since I got out. Sixty-some years.

MH: Congratulations. How many kids?

TM: Just one. Yes. And she's the reason we're down here in Houston.

MH: Oh, she lives down there.

TM: Yes, right. I had a heart attack up in Arkansas and moved down to Arkansas—I'd traveled the state and I fell in love with the people, and there was a gated community for retirees right outside Hot Springs, Arkansas, in the Ouachita Mountains, that's seven golf courses, five lakes, and we loved it. But when I had that heart attack, my daughter wanted me to come home. Come down to here, close to her.

MH: How are you feeling now?

TM: Oh, pretty good.

MH: Well, I thank you very, very much for calling me. I sure appreciate it.

TM: Well, that's all right, Mike.

MH: Okay, take care of yourself.

TM: Mike, you gonna publish a book or something?

MH: Yeah, I'm working on a book.

TM: Oh, are you?

MH: I'm in the early stages of researching all the camps that were liberated by the Americans.

TM: Uh-huh. Have you heard anything from anybody else on this one?

MH: I've heard from a couple people, yes.

TM: Yeah? Were they in Company A?

MH: I don't remember.

TM: Yeah, okay.

MH: I don't remember. Hang on just one second, 'cause I got one name—hang on just a minute. No, this guy was in the M Company of the 255th. His name was George Fait, F-a-i-t.

TM: Oh.

MH: Well, thank you very, very much. I appreciate it.

TM: Well, you're all right, Michael.

MH: Okay. Bye bye.

TM: Good-bye.

End of interview