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Nathan Melman oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, November 30, 2008

Nathan Melman (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: I'd like to turn a recorder on.

Nathan Melman: Well, you could— well, I tell you, I don't know if you have to turn it on, because I've got a lot to tell you.

MH: That makes my life a lot easier if I have the recorder on.

NM: Well, I was going to send you information—

MH: Okay.—

NM: —that was out of a document, and also I had written a few articles a while back for a booklet— a book, actually, that was published, called *The Memories of the 14th Armored Division*.

MH: Okay.

NM: And one of them was about this particular camp—

MH: Okay. Well, let me— first, your name is Nathan Melman, M-e-l-m-a-n?

NM: Right.

MH: What's your address?

NM: The address is....

MH: And your phone number's

NM: That's it.

MH: What's your birth date?

NM: Nathan.

MH: Your birth date.

NM: Oh, birth date? Is March 21, 1922, and I'm not a youngster anymore.

MH: No, but—

NM: I was when this was happening.

MH: But you're nowhere near the oldest guy I've talked to.

NM: What's that?

MH: You're nowhere near the oldest guy I've talked to. The oldest—

NM: Have you talked to others who've been there?

MH: I've talked to— I've interviewed at this point about 150 men and four women.

NM: Four women?

MH: Yeah, nurses.

NM: Nurses? Wow.

MH: And—

NM: I'll tell you what I've got for you—

MH: And the oldest is ninety-six years old.

NM: Ninety-six?

MH: Yeah.

NM: Yeah, I was only a youngster then. This was in forty-five [1945], so I was about twenty-three years old then, and I'd been in the Army for a while. This was a horrible camp, believe me.

MH: Tell me, where were you growing up?

NM: What's that?

MH: Where did you—

NM: Where did I grow up?

MH: Yeah.

NM: In Trenton.

MH: Trenton? And when did you go in the service?

NM: Well, I enlisted in 1942.

MH: Okay, and where'd they send you?

NM: Well, I was all over. I started out at Camp Swift, Texas, climbing telephone poles in the Signal Corps, and then from there, I— they broke up the outfit and they put me in a radio repair depot. And after I was there a while, I applied for training as a pilot, navigator or— let's see, pilot, navigator or bombardier. And I ended up passing. They only took about 25 percent of a—they put us in flights of forty, and out of the forty, they would select, like, ten of the best performers out of the bunch. I ended up in Miami Beach, and then from there, they tested me again and again and again, and finally I went to Smyrna Air Force Base in the Special Pilots Training Squadron. While I was there, apparently they were running short of people in the ground forces, and at the time, the Air Force—actually, it was the Air Corps. It was the Army Air Corps; it was part of the Army. And they broke us up, and then I ended up in the cavalry, and I had a pretty brute experience. I was in almost everything.

MH: Yeah. When did they send you to Europe?

NM: I went when the 14th—actually, before that, I was in a training unit, which was the 20th Armored Division. And then when they were—actually, it was also located at Camp Campbell. It wasn't Fort Campbell; it was Camp Campbell at the time. And when they were trying to fill up the slots to end up with a full complement, I ended up in the 14th Armored, and I left from Camp Shanks, which was in New York, and we went across in a convoy. It was the first, I think, armored division that went over as a complete unit.

MH: Okay. When did you go over?

NM: I guess it was—well, they got us ready—I guess it must have been around

September, and I guess we must've—I don't know exactly when. I mean—

MH: This is forty-three [1943] or forty-four [1944]?

NM: Oh, it was in forty—forty-four [1944], had to be forty-four [1944], because—

MH: So, it was after D-Day.

NM: What's that?

MH: It was after D-Day.

NM: Oh, we came in from southern France—

MH: Okay, fine.

NM: Southern France, and we had to go—actually, we had to fight our way up southern France into Alsace-Lorraine, and most of the fighting we did was in Alsace. And then we, when the Americans were attacked at—during the Bulge, [George S.] Patton made a left turn and he went up and helped free the people from the 101st Airborne Division. And in the meantime, they placed us—where there should've been a whole company of people, we ended up with a platoon of people in the mountainous area where we were. And that was near a place called Bitche—B-i-t-c-h-e—Bitche, France.

On New Year's Eve of 1945, it had to be, we were attacked by the Germans as part of an operation called Operation Northwind. And from what I understand, that was under the command of [Heinrich] Himmler, and that was the only thing he ever commanded. And he didn't do too well, because I guess we all survived it. We had a few big tank battles along the way. And we also liberated quite a few prisoner of war camps. We liberated one at Hammelburg, and Patton's son-in-law was a prisoner there. And that was led by a guy named [Major] Abraham Baum and he led a task force of—nobody knows to this day how many people were in the task force or how many got killed or wounded during that. And a few days afterward, we had to go in and free the people that the Germans had captured. Then we also captured, or liberated, probably one of the largest prisoner of war camps, if not the largest, in Germany, called Moosburg [Stalag VII A].

MH: Right.

NM: And we liberated that. And that was after we had freed the people in (inaudible) V and VI.

MH: So, go—you had said that you'd seen—I forget if you did say if you had seen any of the marchers along the roads?

NM: Any what?

MH: Any of the death marches from the camps along the roads.

NM: Death marches?

MH: Yeah, from the various camps as the Germans were trying to keep people away from the Americans.

NM: Well, what happened, now—they kept moving the prisoners eastward—

MH: Right.

NM: —and they were trying to get them away from us. One of the prisoners that we liberated—and that was on the second of May of 1945—he was from Amsterdam, Holland. He was Jewish, and he had been in a number of concentration camps prior to that. And in this particular case, I think they moved them by vehicle, like in a truck. I know at one time, I was reading a report that he'd written for the Dutch government telling about his experiences there. And he ended up near Ampfing, and I guess he was not in very good health at the time. Finally, by the time we got there, he never thought he was gonna make it, because he was on the verge of death.

And what I have is a written portion of the book that he wrote, and I'm reading on page—let's see what I—what page is—here. I took this out of his book that he sent me to look over, and he was trying to get it published. But, really, he goes into a lot of detail that probably most people wouldn't even be interested in except for you, who's writing this book, and I've got right here in front of me his words that he had written down, and if you want, I can read a few to you. What he does, he tells how sick he was and how he

says—apparently, he says, “May 2, we have early roll call. It must be—” this is on page 448, and this is only part of the book. He must’ve spent a lot of time writing this.

He says, “May 2, we have early roll call. Must be about four or five AM. After about an hour of this, everyone was told to stand in line according to their nationality again. Then we returned to our barracks. Everyone there is agitated. Some fight. The tension is even greater than yesterday. Things are coming closer and closer to a conclusion. Everything is getting worse; my carbuncles, too. My fever rages. Things blur before my eyes. Again, all the inmates stay home. Maupy”—that’s his friend—“and I want to return to Camp VI, but the barrack elder stands at the gate. He laughs at our request but does not hit us. He only chases us off. I stagger worse than before. Everything is spinning in front of us. We want food, water, but they tell us water is contaminated. The few Frenchmen left in our bunker are packing their belongings and eating from their packages again.”

And then he says, uh—let’s see what I got here. Oh, he says that, “And we watch as we did before. Again, they give us nothing.” Apparently, the French wouldn’t share anything with them. “They must’ve forgotten how we spread our potatoes around, even when they did not have anything to deal with. Now they have food again, and we do without again. Roll call is announced, this time in full daylight.”

And he keeps going like this, and then he talks about—he says, “Again—” this is another paragraph. He says, “They count us and make us wait. The tension is unbearable. Are they going to shoot us or not? My fever rages.” And apparently he never expected to live through this, not only from his illness but the fact that every time they brought ’em out and lined them up, I guess he figured they were going to take them out and shoot the whole bunch of them, which maybe would’ve been the intention. But he says here—okay, he says, “And I, needing—we feel that this is the end.” They marched thousands of men away, and he wasn’t sure where they were taking them. And he figured they were going to take those out and shoot them and then come back and get the rest of them.

MH: And which camp is he in?

NM: He says, “We feel this is the end, and we are—”

MH: Which camp is he in?

NM: You still there?

MH: Yes. I said, which camp is he in?

NM: What's that?

MH: Which camp was he in?

NM: Yeah, I guess—actually, they weren't all living in the same way, either. Some of 'em had larger bunkers that they were living in.

MH: Yeah, but was this in Ampfing?

NM: In Ampfing. In Ampfing, yeah. And by the way, it's spelled A-m-p-h-i-n-g [*sic*] as far as I know.

MH: Okay.

NM: Well, yeah. I guess it could be spelled either way.

MH: Yeah. What I'm interested in is, where were you at this point?

NM: I was one of the first ones into the camp.

MH: Okay, but tell me what—your unit was coming from where?

NM: We were coming from west to east.

MH: Okay.

NM: And we happened to hit this camp. I'm pretty sure we weren't aware that the camp was even there.

MH: Had you seen any other camps like this?

NM: Like this? No, nobody had seen any like this one.

MH: No. Okay.

NM This was bad. In fact, I have a photograph in the—in fact, it was published with that article I wrote for the *Memories*, and it shows a large excavation where about two thousand of the prisoners were buried.

MH: Okay. What kind of vehicle were you riding in?

NM: Well, we had in our outfit—Well, actually, we were in reconnaissance, so the reconnaissance was—you'd have to know the construction of the way it was set up, but A, B, C, and D Troop were reconnaissance, and what they used were Jeeps. They called 'em—

MH: They called them “Peeps,” okay. I've actually seen pictures of them, so I know—

NM: Yeah, Jeeps and armored cars.

MH: Right, okay.

NM: And also half-tracks.

MH: So, which one were you in?

NM: I was in a Jeep. I was—my MOS [Military Occupational Specialty] was a mortar gunner, but most of the time I was either driving or whatever.

MH: Was this a Jeep with the steel, you know, windshield plate?

NM: No—

MH: No.

NM: In fact the thing that we did—no, the Jeeps we had had glass windows—

MH: And you put them down—

NM: And I remember the first time we were engaged in combat, the Germans were shelling us, and it ended up with a tarp on the top of the roof. It was like a folding tarp that came down and the windshield was just glass inside a metal frame that would fold down. And after the first day, the windshield was just glass inside of a metal frame that was folded down.

MH: Right.

NM: And after the first day the windshield was shattered, and we had shrapnel holes through everything, including the shovel on the side of the Jeep. You know, it went right through the spade portion of the shovel. And we just left that down mostly for the whole war. But what they did, the Germans used to string a wire—

MH: Yeah, I—

NM: —across the road.

MH: I was in Vietnam. I'm familiar with the trick.

NM: Yeah. So, what they had welded onto the front of the unit—

MH: Yeah—

NM: —were these—

MH: Catch rods.

NM: Yeah, it was a rod with a sharp blade on it, so as the wire went up, it would try to cut it. And every day, almost, that I was over there, I was being shot at, so it doesn't make any difference.

MH: So, tell me about approaching this camp. Did—

NM: What's that?

MH: Tell me about approaching the camp. Did—

NM: Approaching the camp?

MH: Yeah.

NM: We were in the woods, and it was all wooded area.

MH: You're not driving on a road.

NM: Oh, it's a road of sorts.

MH: Okay.

NM: I mean, it's not a superhighway or autobahn, but you know, a dirt road through the woods. In fact, even coming up over the Bulge mountains [Ardennes Mountains], the roads were not paved. I mean, this is the same road that Hannibal took with his elephants when he came up from the south. So, I think ours was the first military unit since Hannibal that ever went through there, and as we went through there, we'd go up the road, like, we'd go a few feet, we had tanks, and they'd go a few feet, and then before we got there, they had already, I guess, decided to blow the road in front of us. And while they were setting up their explosives a little further down the road, and at the time, I never thought we'd get the hell out of there alive.

MH: Mr. Melman, can I put you on hold for, like, one minute?

NM: Go ahead.

MH: Okay, hold on one second. (rustling)

Pause in recording

MH: Sometimes, when you gotta go, you gotta go.

NM: That's all right. Anyway, you know—I told you, we liberated at Moosburg a lot of Americans and Allied prisoners of war, and even though—even at Hammelburg, the camps themselves were not bad compared to what these people were living in.

MH: Right. What—

NM: They were living in total squalor, and apparently they were guarded by SS troops in a lot of cases. And even after we liberated them, we had to guard them in the camp. We had to try to round them up, get them back in the camp, and try to keep them contained. And our job was just to watch them overnight while they brought in other troops, and probably some of those are people that you may have talked to if they were there. They weren't in the first batch, I don't think.

MH: Right. You didn't—were there still any Germans in the camp?

NM: Yeah, there were, because—

MH: Were they shooting at you?

NM: Were they shooting? They were trying to get the hell outta there, and the prisoners, as weak as they were—I wrote down some notes for myself. As weak as they were, they got hold of—I think there were five Germans that they captured that were guards, and two of them must've been so mean and rotten that, as weak as the prisoners were, they beat them to death with their bare hands.

MH: As you were coming in or before you got there?

NM: No, after we were there.

MH: After you were there.

NM: Yeah, after we were there. And the other three, they told us that they were half decent not to hurt them, so we let those three go. One was the—they just left the bodies of these two lying near the front gate, and one of the officers told them, “Well, we let you kill them,” like, “We didn’t stop you. Now, pick them up and take them someplace and bury them. We don’t want them laying there.” So they said, “Bury them?” And they all lined up, the ones that were able to walk, and they urinated on them.

MH: (laughs) Somehow I knew you were gonna say that.

NM: Yeah, like, this is, “You want to bury them? You bury them. We’re not gonna bury them.” (laughs)

MH: Yeah.

NM: But I have a picture of the mass grave. I didn’t have a real good camera. I had to wait until I liberated one a little later.

MH: Did you drive your Jeep into the camp?

NM: Oh, yeah, we had the tanks in there and the Jeep. I was with—actually, it wasn’t just Jeeps and armored cars. We actually were doing the reconnaissance. The one that we were with was the 48th Tank Battalion, and that was led at the time by a Major Cavin, C-a-v-i-n, and hell of a nice guy, smart guy. And we did a lot of work with him because each day they would assign us who we went with, and a good portion of the time, we were with the 48th Tank Battalion.

MH: So, did the 48th pull into the camp?

NM: Yes, pulled in there and—

MH: Did you have to knock down the gates, or were the gates open?

NM: Well, I guess the prisoners must've opened them when they heard the shooting. According to this article that this guy wrote—you'd have to read it to appreciate it, but he says they opened the gate and some of the prisoners walked out. In fact, he was one of them, even as sick as he was. He got up. I guess his friend helped him up, and they walked out of the gate and then walked back in just to see if anybody would harm them. Nobody bothered them, so I guess they left the gate open, and finally you got everybody walking in and out of the front gate. But we stayed there overnight—

MH: What did you do? You pull in, you get out of your Jeep, and now what?

NM: Well, we got out, and we saw that these people were really in bad shape. And they hadn't eaten, they were starving, and apparently they'd been mistreated the whole time or a good portion of the time they were there. And this Major Cavin told us to take the rations that we had—and we used to keep them tied to the top of the armored cars or the tanks had them, tied to the top of the tanks, and on the Jeeps we had cases of C rations or D rations, whatever we had at the time. And he said to get up on top of the vehicles and throw the food down to these people. You know, you can imagine, like, if you went into Times Square and got up on top of one of the tall buildings—

MH: Yeah. It's a good way to start a riot.

NM: Hmm?

MH: It's a good way to start a riot.

NM: It was worse than a riot. These people were grabbing the cans. These are sick people. Like, they could barely move, some of them, and they're grabbing the cans we throw down, like C rations, and they were clobbering each other with the cans. There was no need for it, but they were. And as soon as Major Cavin saw that happening, he told us to stop throwing the food down, line them all up, and pass out the rations that we had to them.

MH: There were no medics around who said you could kill them by giving them food?

NM: Apparently, some of the prisoners that did eat our food did die as a result of eating

the food. But we only had usually, like, two medics that were attached to us all the way through. And even two of those, early, had to be replaced because the Germans had shot them. And you know, they have a big red cross on, and it didn't make a damn bit of difference. So, my lieutenant—or, actually, at the time he was a sergeant—he picked out—I think there were about seven. We captured a whole bunch of Germans; that was at a different place; that was before we ever got to this. And he picked out seven of them and told the guys, "Take them in the back," and I couldn't figure out how the hell did he know who to pick out? How can he tell who's doing the shooting? And one of the guys told me, he picked them out because they were wearing camouflaged ponchos, and he figured they had to be the snipers.

MH: Right.

NM: But it was a very interesting experience, even though at the time it seemed like—many times, like we were never gonna make it out of there alive.

MH: Yeah. Go back to—you're in Ampfing. Did you walk around and look inside the buildings?

NM: There was no buildings, hardly. Most of what they—I told you, where they were staying, there must've been a building for the guards. That's about it. But as far as where the prisoners were, they were living in holes in the ground—and I'm going by memory—and let's say maybe five foot by six foot, and it was dug down about maybe four feet or so, and they had a wooden roof, like it was a peaked roof that they'd place over the top of the hole. So, when they wanted to clean or whatever, they'd pick the roof up. But I imagine in a rain, like they must've been swimming down there. But each unit housed, like, four inmates, as far as I could see. They put men, women, didn't make any difference. And I guess if they messed around, they would kill both the man and the woman. But they were just lucky to be alive.

MH: Did you have a chance to talk to any of the prisoners there?

NM: Oh, yeah. Not only did I talk to them, I became—well, not only did I talk to them, but they even had prisoners there from my mother's hometown. She came from—it was Austria-Hungary, later became Czechoslovakia, and that was one of the areas that they had taken Jewish prisoners to put them into the concentration camp.

MH: Were you speaking Yiddish to them, or—?

NM: What's that?

MH: Were you speaking Yiddish or were you speaking—?

NM: Oh, I talked to one there. I talked to several, and the more intelligent ones—like, they had a doctor there, and his name was Schoenfeld. And he came from my mother's hometown, and he knew the family.

MH: What was the hometown?

NM: The hometown was in—it ended up, after World War I, in Czechoslovakia, and it was a place called—actually, the area was Munkacs, M-u-n-k-a-c-s. And he knew some of the family. Then, later, after we pulled out—because we were only there overnight, and anybody else who came in later was not there, and I say to emphasize that they were not there when they were freed, although you'll find all kind of people going around the schools and everything telling them how they freed the camp.

MH: I've run into people like that.

NM: Yeah, and they like to take credit for it. Now, we were there guarding them, and I thought, you know, here we freed them—

MH: What did these—tell me what these prisoners looked like?

NM: Well, I got pictures of them. I took some pictures.

MH: Okay, but how would you describe —

NM: Disheveled.

MH: Yeah.

NM: They were wearing any kind of clothes they could find; like, normally in most

camps, they wore a striped uniform, like blue and white stripes.

MH: Right.

NM: Here, they were wearing—not only—some of them were wearing that uniform, but they were wearing, like, an overcoat, an old overcoat over the top, and we're talking about in May, when it should've been relatively mild.

MH: Were—I assume they were dirty?

NM: Filthy dirty. These—they didn't even have water to drink. They had nothing. They used to fight over potato peels.

MH: Yeah. What did you talk to these prisoners about?

NM: What's that?

MH: What did you talk to them about?

NM: Well, tried to find out what went on, then we—I walked around the camp, and I found this big mass grave. And apparently the prisoners would dig the grave, and they'd go, maybe thirty, forty feet. They had, like, a removable barrier, so while they were—like, when they pulled up the opening with the prisoners underneath, they would pull the wooden barrier up and move it down like thirty, forty [feet], then dig, and move the barrier down thirty or forty more feet. And I asked them, you know, what happened, they would tell me that even if a prisoner wasn't totally dead, they'd just toss him in there and just bury him.

MH: Was this mass grave open on the top?

NM: Open. I got a picture of it.

MH: So, you can see bodies.

NM: No.

MH: No, they were—'cause—

NM: It was—the bodies were underneath the earth, and apparently they had moved the barrier down so they could do some more digging, and I took a picture.

MH: Explain how the barrier worked? It was a long trench?

NM: A long trench in the woods, and —

MH: Oh, they would put the barrier in and fill the graves behind the barrier.

NM: Fill the graves behind it, and then keep digging from the barrier on—

MH: And then move—

NM: —another thirty or forty [feet], and then move the barrier—

MH: Got it, okay.

NM: —down, and then as soon as they got enough inmates in there—

MH: Did you get a sense of how many people were buried there? Or how many—

NM: Yes. In that particular one, and I don't know how many others there might've been in the woods, there were about two thousand.

MH: What did they have these prisoners doing? Were they working or just being kept there to die?

NM: Well, as far as I know, they were part of a large operation, and like I said, they were,

to the best of my knowledge, making ammunition. And some of the ammunition, like TNT or whatever else they were cooking up there, you couldn't just stop the process. They had to keep it going, so I think it was like two weeks they had to keep the darn thing going until they completed the process.

MH: Who kept it going? The American GIs or the inmates?

NM: Well, I imagine it must've been the American GIs with the help of the prisoners that had been working on it.

MH: Mm-hm. So, how long did you stay at Ampfing?

NM: There? Overnight.

MH: Yeah.

NM: Overnight, and then we kept going. And we got to the Inns River [*sic*]. In fact at a place called Jettenbach, J-e-t-t-e-n. It's not too far away from there, but it's a bigger town, a fairly good-sized town there. And there we captured a whole Luftwaffe outfit. I got pictures of them. And during the war—in fact, it was right around New Year's of forty-five [1945]—we saw the first military jets that anybody had ever seen, and they appeared right over our area. Nobody'd ever seen a jet before, you know, flying. And they told us to get out there and take any weapon we had and shoot at it.

MH: Yeah, right.

NM: Hmm?

MH: That'll work.

NM: And they said—yeah, (inaudible) the bullets or whatever we were shooting at them with, and hopefully we would knock out the turbine blades. Although there was one jet that crashed, and everybody claimed credit for it; but I think it crashed because the pilot didn't have enough training. I mean, we were the first to see them, and I'm sure they did a very, very shallow job of training them.

MH: Yeah. Right. Did you get into any of the other camps near there? Did you get in to Mühldorf?

NM: Which one?

MH: Mühldorf, the camp they call Dachau III B?

NM: Not as such, but apparently Dachau wasn't near Mühldorf; I guess you know that.

MH: Right, but there was a camp called Dachau III B—

NM: That's right.

MH: —at Mühldorf that the 14th is given credit for liberating.

NM: Our division probably liberated it. However, our mission was a certain mission. I was in the first vehicle to cross the Inns River, and my lieutenant at the time, who was a rotten bastard, he says, "Melman," he says, "get across the river," and it was myself and a Spanish fellow from California. And then I said to him, "Where the hell you gonna be when I'm doing this?" And this was, like, a power plant that they had rigged up over the river: a pretty sophisticated outfit. And from what I understand, they tried to blow it but they couldn't. I guess it had rained. I know it was raining when we crossed it. And the guy, the lieutenant, says, "I'll be right behind you." So, I started out, we went across the bridge, and as we got about halfway, they started shooting at us with anti-aircraft guns that were bursting right over our head. And I looked at the guy next to me, and I said, "Jose, where's Newkirk? Where is he, following us?" He looked back there and said, "Hell, no; he's not even following you. We're the only ones on the bridge."

MH: Nice.

NM: And he wanted to see if we were gonna get across, and that's when they came across. And—

MH: You said it was raining then. What kind of a day was it when you got to Ampfing?

NM: At Ampfing?

MH: Yeah.

NM: At Ampfing—it wasn't raining then, because at Ampfing—from Ampfing, we went to Jettenbach, and then we had captured this—I guess it must've been—I don't know how many people in the squadron. It must've been—it was a pretty large number of Germans, and one of the things they surrounded, they wanted the highest officer that we could find that they wanted to surrender to. And we contacted Major Cavin; he later became a lieutenant colonel. But he came down and made a deal with them where we would not take their weapons. So, all these guys are walking around with sidearms and whatever weapons they had, and all their vehicles, and we took them, marched them down to a staging area. Somewhere along afterward, after we got them to that area, we continued on and the Germans who surrendered, they were trying to get away from the Russians.

MH: Yeah.

NM: So.

MH: When did you finally come home to the States?

NM: The States? Well, I ended up in Czechoslovakia, even though my mother came from there. I tried to get to see my uncle, and I couldn't get approval for the pass. I didn't get home until—I guess it was the early part or sometime around March of forty-six [1946].

MH: Did you know—

NM: I was one of the last ones. Like, I was so far east; they didn't even try to get us out of there.

MH: Right. Did you know whether you'd had relatives killed by the Nazis?

NM: Yes. Yes, they did. My—I had one of my mother's—in fact, her younger brother

was studying to be a doctor, and he was killed by the Germans. And then her oldest brother, he had a family and there were two children. Never found them. And he and his wife were both killed. And I had an aunt who was married, and she—her husband was killed at Auschwitz.

MH: Did you know all this when you were in the service there?

NM: No.

MH: You didn't find out this until later?

NM: Later, right.

MH: Yeah.

NM: And in fact, there was another uncle I had who had—I guess he must have been fighting with the Russians, and he had taken—when the Germans came into the area where one of my aunts was living—I guess this was in Budapest someplace—and she had two children, a young boy and a girl. And he grabbed them and they were rounded up, her and her husband. Her husband died, she survived Auschwitz. And he took the boy and the girl to a farm where I guess they were non-Jewish, and they hid them for the whole portion until the war was over, and I guess they didn't even get a chance to see the—they live up in Connecticut now. Oh, the boy does. The girl lives in Israel. But you're Jewish, I guess.

MH: Yes.

NM: I can tell by the name.

MH: Yeah. Were you very religious before you went in the Army?

NM: Was I?

MH: Yes.

NM: I came from a religious family. But I was probably, I guess, semi-religious, but not totally.

MH: Did seeing what you saw during the war affect that at all?

NM: It affect me?

MH: Did it affect your level of being religious?

NM: Well, not as such, not as—not religious-wise, because by the time the war ended, I think I would've—I wouldn't hesitate to follow any order they gave me, and it didn't bother me. Nothing would bother me.

MH: Okay. Once you came home, how did that stuff affect you?

NM: It didn't.

MH: Once you came home, how do you think the war changed you?

NM: It didn't change me.

MH: Not at all.

NM: I probably changed the war.

MH: Okay.

NM: Because it took people like myself—not that I'm any great warrior or anything, but it took somebody to do what we did. In fact, I was reading in that same issue of the 14th Armored Division booklet, *The Liberator*, the latest one that came out where I saw your letter in there. I don't know if you got a copy of it.

MH: No, I didn't.

NM: There's an article in there by a fellow who—I think he was about ten years old, nine or ten years old during one of the battles at Hatten and Rittershoffen. This was a very, very hard-fought battle that lasted for, I guess, about two weeks or so. And in the article—it was written by this fellow who was nine or ten years old at the time, who's now I guess about seventy years old or so, and he thanked—he was thanking the people from the 14th. I guess he's in touch with some of them, and he was thanking them for liberating the area that where the tank battle was fought.

MH: Do you ever go out and talk to groups about your experiences?

NM: No, no, I—once. Once, I was invited. Well, I was invited more than once, but in this one particular case, I was invited to talk and they sat us up on a stage. I guess it was at a school in Philadelphia, and I took the trouble to get there. When I got there, they went down—I was sitting on the stage here, and they took one fellow in front on my right or wherever he was, sitting; then they took the next one, next one, next one, and they got to me, and they forgot I was sitting there, I guess. And he went down and took the rest of them, and I was sitting here like a bump on a log. And after it was over, I said, “You know, you invited me down here to talk, and when it comes my turn to talk, you just skipped.”

“Oh,” he says, “I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry. We'll give you another chance. We'll call you back again.” So, they call me back. Sure as hell, they do the same goddamn thing. And after that, I figured, the hell with all of them, because it doesn't make any difference. Most of the people I would talk to anyway, except somebody was there or had a real interest in it.

But like I said, it was very interesting. And what I can do for you—what I'd like to do, I have copies out of this report or book, whatever, this fellow has written. I'm in touch with him every May 2 for many years. He calls me to thank me for what we did. Not that I expect any thanks.

MH: Where is he?

NM: He's in Texas.

MH: Oh, okay.

NM: He started out in Louisiana, and then apparently he ended up in Texas, and he just—he retired several years ago, but he did come to see me. He came from Texas, he and his wife, and he came to visit me. And he's been in touch with me; he calls me several times a year, especially on the second of May, and he's been in touch. But what I'd like to do is—and I'm pretty sure he'd agree to it—but any information you take from the report, if it's of interest to you at all—I mean, this is a guy who not only was a liberator—he was a liberator, but he was an inmate. And it tells how he felt, like how he figured for sure this is it. You know, like, never gonna make it alive. And he made it out alive. He's older than I am by a few years. I'm eighty-six, going on eighty-seven, if I live that long. A year ago, I spent almost two months in the hospital. The doctor almost did me in. But anyway, I survived it and am still trying to recuperate.

MH: Right. What did you do as a career for most of your life?

NM: What's that?

MH: What was your job for most of your life?

NM: Well, most of my life, actually, when I went into the service, I was working for General Motors. We were working on the Avenger bomber, N80 bomber aircraft, and they were manufacturing it in Trenton, had a large operation going there. It's going now. And then when I came out, I went back to school for a while, and then I got married. But I ended up most of the work that we did, I ended up with an engineering company that did work for the military, particularly the Navy, and I worked on a lot of expensive equipment. And I supervised a group of people designing, I guess, special weapons systems, including catapults and the arresting equipment for catching the airplanes on aircraft carriers. I also worked on a missile recovery system for the Polaris, the Poseidon, and the Triton missiles, and worked on test equipment for testing jet engines that the Navy uses. For all of them, we had little—I guess little setup, where it was in like a small container, and we had all the equipment in there for testing, different engines that the Navy uses. And I'd say most of the equipment we worked on is still being used to this day.

MH: I forgot to ask you: were you wounded in the war?

NM: What's that?

MH: Were you wounded in the war?

NM: Once.

MH: Shrapnel?

NM: Not exactly, no. No, it was—I guess you'd say, because they came close to getting a near hit, (laughs) but I ended up in a—they carted me away. I can't even remember, but it was in the back of a Jeep and they took me to a field hospital. From there, they took me a little farther back, and then I tried to get back to my outfit, and it was—I couldn't make heads or tails, so in the end, I ended up where I just took off and started back on my own, and I located them. Took me a while. And I located them and I joined them again.

MH: Do you have any pictures of yourself in the war?

NM: Yeah, I do. But—yeah, I have pictures and they—

MH: What I'd like to get is a good picture of you from the war and then a picture of you now.

NM: Well, I got one when I first went in the army.

MH: Okay.

NM: And I'm looking at one right in front of me. It's another good picture because—I don't know what happened to any of the photographs. I got so many of them. I don't know what the hell I did with them, but they're all over the place, and I always figured one of these days I'd try to straighten it out, but I guess—

MH: You said you have some from Ampfing?

NM: From Ampfing, yeah, but not of me there. I took pictures of some of the inmates.

MH: Are they pretty good?

NM: Well, the one is pretty good, but I don't have the original. I have—I have a copy, like a Xerox copy.

MH: Ah, that's probably won't work.

NM: Hmm?

MH: That probably—a Xerox copy probably won't work.

NM: No. I got a Xerox copy of it. I may have it around someplace, but I'd have to look for it. I've got drawers full of this stuff.

MH: Yeah. Do you have an e-mail address?

NM: Huh?

MH: Do you have email?

NM: I have, but I don't use it.

MH: Oh, 'cause I was gonna—

NM: I don't use it because I don't get to the computer that often. Even—I tried to clear it last night. I think I had 187 messages or something.

MH: Oh, I was going to send you my address by e-mail.

NM: I have your address.

MH: Oh, you've got it, okay.

NM: It was in that article. Yeah.

MH: Okay. Um, if you—

NM: What I want to do is I'll send you briefly—I don't want to write letters back and forth where it's going to take a lot of my time. He says, "I am alone, no part of it." He's lying there in the dark, and he says, "In the back of the bunker, waiting for the end." He says, "I cannot even cry, though I want to. I will kick myself, call myself names, because I don't move and want to. What a nightmare. The door is opening, it darkens, and Maupy storms in again. He turns his face back to the entrance and says in English, 'Yes, yes, here he is, my comrade. He is sick, dying. Here, here he is.'

"And suddenly, I see. I see a cowboy, a real cowboy with a steel helmet. My mind, my head, all of a sudden clear. And I see a cowboy, sunburned, healthy, with a helmet and a thousand pockets for bullets and a gun; another short gun rests in his arm. There must be a thousand grenades on his belt. His rolled-up sleeve show strong, healthy arms, which are stretched out to me, and I hear, 'Come on. Come on, boy. Come, comrade, come,' and I rise, crawl, lift myself. I can do it. I take short, staggering steps toward the outstretched arms. I fell against him. He picks me up and smiles. How strong he is, and all of a sudden, I'm able to cry and hug him, and he hugs me back. Then he kisses me—the outcast, the starving, dirty, stinking pariah—and I kiss him back."

So, that's when he saw the first American. It wasn't me.

MH: What's his name?

NM: His name is Coen, C-o-e-n, and his last name is R-o-o-d. Rood, Coen Rood.¹

MH: And he lives in Texas?

NM: He lives in Texas, yeah.

MH: Okay.

¹ Coenraad Rod was also interviewed for the Concentration Camp Liberators Oral History Project. The DOI for his interview is C65-00116.

NM: He's probably—he goes around and talks at different organizations, or he was talking when he was healthier and younger.

MH: Right, yeah. Well, if you could get in touch with him and ask him if I could call him.

NM: Yeah, I'm sure he'd agree.

MH: Okay.

NM: I shouldn't say I'm sure, but I'm pretty sure.

MH: Okay.

NM: And if he does—now, he did try to get this published, except it's so massive now. Like I said, I'm on page 480-something.

MH: Right.

NM: And that's only part of the book.

MH: Yeah.

NM: Like, the book will be so burdensome that I don't think anybody would sit down and really read it unless they're interested. But he did have a version of it that was published in German, and I don't know what the hell's in the book, but he gave me a copy.

MH: Okay.

NM: But everything's in German, and I guess they must have cut it down, left out a lot of these—

MH: Yeah.

End of interview