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Wayne "Roy" Ogle oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, November 1, 2008

Wayne L. Ogle (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: And what I want to do is get your name and information first.

Wayne “Roy” Ogle: Sure.

MH: So, if you could give me your full name and spell it for me, please.

WO: Yeah, Wayne, W-a-y-n-e, L. Ogle, O-g-l-e.

MH: Okay, but they call you “Roy”?

WO: They call me “Roy” because it’s “Leroy.”

MH: Oh, okay. And you’re a PhD?

WO: I’m a Ph.D.

MH: And your address, please?

WO: ...

MH: And your phone number is.... What's your date of birth?

WO: December 23, 1922.

MH: Twenty-three, 1922.

WO: Yeah, I was a young man when I was there.

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

WO: I was born and raised in Knoxville, Tennessee.

MH: How did you go in the Army: enlist, drafted?

WO: A little bit of both. I enlisted—I was a college student, and I enlisted in a Reserve, and then the Reserve was called up, so it was actually a draft when you got right down to it.

MH: What unit did you go into?

WO: I went into the Infantry ROTC [Reserve Officers Training Corps].

MH: Ultimately, when did you go to Europe?

WO: I went to Europe in 1944, yeah.

MH: With what unit?

WO: With the 84th Infantry Division.

MH: And you were a rifleman?

WO: No, I was in an anti-tank platoon.

MH: Which means you're using what kind of weaponry?

WO: It was a 57mm anti-tank gun. It's like an artillery piece, except it's got a flat trajectory, and it was a tank destroyer, is what it was.

MH: And you went to Europe around when?

WO: At the same time Ken did, which—I would have to look it up, but it was the fall of 1944.¹

MH: And this was after D-Day or before?

WO: Yes, it was. D-Day was June 6, and we went overseas in September, after D-Day. In other words, six months later.

MH: And you went where?

WO: We went to Omaha Beach, landed at Omaha Beach. Much after D-Day, of course, no fighting or anything like that. So, then we went on through France to Belgium, and in Belgium, we jumped off into combat in Germany. We were right on the German lines when we finally landed there after our overseas trip.

MH: So, you were there before the Bulge?

WO: I was there before the Bulge and during the Bulge.

¹ Kenneth Ayers was also interviewed for the Concentration Camp Liberators Oral History Project. The DOI for his interview is C65-00006.

MH: And during the Bulge. What was your first combat action?

WO: First combat that we were in was—oh, my goodness, let's see. Let me think just a second. Just put down Siegfried Line.

MH: Okay, close enough. And where were you during the Bulge?

WO: We were at Marche [Marche-en-Famenne], Belgium. It's the northernmost part of the Bulge.

MH: Nobody's mentioned that before. I was unfamiliar with it.

WO: This was one of the keys to the defense of the Army. It was a very important stand. 84th Infantry Division was very important in the Battle of the Bulge.

MH: How long were you in the fighting there?

WO: Seems to me it was about six weeks, but it seemed like six years.

MH: Cold as hell?

WO: Oh, God, it was unbelievable. I ruined my feet when I was in Belgium.

MH: They were wet with the snow and ice?

WO: Well, it was what they call frostbite, and yeah, it's—what do you call it? Hypothermia, yeah. I just ruined my feet there, and everybody else that I've ever been associated with that was there did the same thing.

MH: What was the end of the Bulge for you guys?

WO: We ended up at Houffalize. I was in the hospital, but the other guys went on to Houffalize, and that was the end of the Bulge.

MH: Were you wounded, or you were there for your feet?

WO: I was wounded.

MH: Shrapnel, bullets?

WO: Shrapnel, yeah, in the chest.

MH: How badly hit were you?

WO: It was a minor hit. But my friend was right beside me was almost killed, and he later—I think it did kill him, to be honest with you. He lasted for a few years, but he was terribly wounded. I was just plain damned lucky, that's all there is to it. Oh, man, was I lucky.

MH: There are those moments in combat when the only explanation for living or dying is luck.

WO: And that was my case. Actually, I had on everything I had, and I had on a heavy, real heavy overcoat, plus a field jacket plus everything else I could get on. The shrapnel went through that double-lined of the lapel on the overcoat. It went through the lapel and went through my Army jacket, field jacket, combat jacket. And went through all the other clothing that I had on, and it lodged in my chest, believe it or not.

MH: But it had slowed it up enough.

WO: It slowed it enough to where it didn't kill me. If it'd penetrated my chest, it would've gone right into my heart. I was lucky.

MH: How long were you in the hospital?

WO: Oh, it seems to me I was there about two weeks, as I recall. So, I wasn't in for the last part of the Bulge.

MH: How'd you rejoin your unit?

WO: Well, they had—there was a time limit, of course, but when I got through, they had a Jeep there to take me back to my unit, and I ended up with a tank platoon.

MH: You just told me something I didn't realize. You mean if you were wounded and they took you to the hospital, there was a time limit if you were there; under that time limit, you went back to your old unit, and if you were longer, you got reassigned?

WO: That's right, you went into replacement depot. And I barely made it.

MH: I didn't know that.

WO: Yeah, this is true. This is the way they operated. Oh, a lot of our guys never got back, because, you know, they were in the hospital for too long, so they didn't come back.

MH: Where was your unit when you rejoined them?

WO: Oh, they were in a rest area there in Belgium, and just having a great time. (laughs)

MH: At that point, what, if anything, do you know about concentration camps, the Holocaust, that sort of thing?

WO: You know, all of us were familiar with the major concentration camps and the crematoriums and all that sort of thing.

MH: You were?

WO: Oh, yeah. We were aware of it. This was generally known. I'm not sure at what point in time I knew about it, but yeah, I knew that there was such a thing. And as I

recall, Salzwedel—now, this is simply my recollection. I think those prisoners were used as—I think it was a labor camp.

MH: Probably.

WO: And what they would do is—I think some of them worked on farms, and probably some of them worked in factories. And then, at night—they'd haul them out there during the day, let them work, and bring them back in at night. Now, that was my understanding. I did not speak German, so I couldn't understand everything that was going on, but this is the way that I remembered it, and I'll tell you, I was never as shocked in all of my life when I saw those guys. They were skeletons. That's all you can say.

MH: Tell me about the day you got to Salzwedel. What was going on?

WO: The day I got to Salzwedel, these guys were overjoyed, and they had been outside, but I think that our commander had locked them back up, you know, just to protect them from getting out. They really weren't able to do much.

MH: But you were coming down the road and you saw the camp, or you went looking for the camp?

WO: No, we went right up to the gates of the camp, and they had put them back in. The gates were locked when I got there.

MH: So, there were Americans there just ahead of you.

WO: Now, I think probably we were the first ones there, but that I don't know, to be honest with you. I better not say.

MH: So, you're riding in your vehicle?

WO: We were riding in the vehicle, yeah.

MH: What do you see?

WO: Well, what we saw was—the thing I remember best about it is, apparently they had really become jubilant about the fact that they were free, you know, and they would run—they had run all over camp, and they had spilled flour on the ground and all of this, you know. They were rebelling, basically, is what it was. And the guards had all taken off. They ran. And so, they were just having a fine time of it; and apparently, if I'm not mistaken, I think the air commander must have tried to restore order by putting them back in until the rescue troops could come in and take care of their medical needs. And I also remember, for some reason, I briefly remember that there were some British and some American prisoners there. Not many, but maybe a half a dozen, something like that, and they got those guys out pronto, and they sent them back behind the American lines where they could get medical attention.

MH: Do you remember seeing women prisoners?

WO: You know, I do not. I do not. I have the feeling it was all male. I don't know. Better not say.

MH: I'll read you something in a minute, because I think the women were locked in a barracks, which might be why you didn't see them. How long were you there at Salzwedel?

WO: Well, Ken and I were talking about that the other day, and as I recall, we were there for three or four days. See, we were still at war. We were in a combat area and still moving. But now, as I recall, in order to restore law and order and get some medical help to these people, I think we hung around there a couple of days, and maybe some of the other troops in my unit, in the 84th, went on and then we had to rejoin them later. This is pretty vague in my mind. The thing that struck me so strongly was, I have never—I did not believe that anybody could be that way, and I'm still in a state of shock from it.

MH: You were there a couple days. What did you do?

WO: At the time, I was corporal gunner on that anti-tank gun, and so what they would do is they would detail you for different jobs. So, one of the things I'm sure I served at was corporal of the guard, because I did it, you know, I did it pretty much through the Bulge and after the Bulge. So, I think that I would've been in charge of the guard.

MH: Were you in the camp or just outside the wire?

WO: Outside. I was never inside that camp. Gates were locked, and you know, they were trying to restore order. It was not inhumane, what the American troops did, by any stretch; it was for the benefit of—it was for the benefit of the prisoners. They needed medical help, and they needed all kinds of help. It was terrible.

MH: How soon did the Army have medical units and cooks and other people there to help feed and heal these people?

WO: I'm sure immediately. I'm sure that our own medics moved in, and I'm sure that our battalion surgeon was right on the job and he was helping. He was a fine man, and he was kind of a take-charge guy, you know? So, he's one you need to interview.

MH: Is he still alive?

WO: As far as I know, he's alive.

MH: What's his name?

WO: Captain Hazlett, H-a-z-l-e-t-t.

MH: Any idea where he lives?

WO: Well, I'm sure the roster would give it. Have you got a copy of the roster?

MH: No, I don't.

WO: You surely need a copy of it. Call Ken and tell him that one of the things you need is a copy of our roster, and these things are available through the 84th. Have you talked to Forrest (inaudible)?

MH: Yes.

WO: Oh, okay, he's your man. Call him back and tell him you need a copy of the roster, and run Captain Hazlett down, because he'll be an excellent resource for you. And some of those medics of his; see, he was in charge of all the medical service, Captain Hazlett was and any of those—and I'm sure there are several of those that are still alive that can tell you about—and, see, they would have more of an idea, because they were the ones that gave the service. I was simply there to kind of help maintain law and order, so to speak.

MH: Did you see any camps after you left Salzwedel?

WO: Nope, Salzwedel was the only one that I saw. That was the only one that I was ever involved with, and I don't know whether other members—I don't think my unit was involved in any other one. We saw a lot of the prisoners, of course, after they were liberated. They were what we called "displaced persons," DPs, and they came through. But we—I don't recall another one there. Dachau, I guess, was the big one.

MH: Yeah, Dachau was a big one. But you didn't see any others? What's the long-term impact of having been at a place like Salzwedel?

WO: Oh, it's just a terrible nightmare. I've even dreamed about it. About those scarecrows that came out, you know, and it was just the saddest, really. It was terrible.

MH: How often—when's the last time you dreamed about it?

WO: Oh, it's been some time, although now that I'm reminded of it, I may do it again. But, you know, it's just—it was so terrible that it's just hard to describe, to see a man and from you say, maybe there were some women, too, that are just plain skin and bones, and that's all. It's just a terrible thing. It's worse than seeing a corpse, I'll tell you that, and I've seen plenty of those.

MH: Really? That's the impact that it has?

WO: It has exactly the same impact, really and truly. You know, when you—during the Battle of the Bulge, we saw hundreds of American soldiers that had been wounded and died and were frozen. And the impact was pretty much the same. You know, a human being is still a human being, and it doesn't make any difference what he is or where he's from or anything else or anything else, whether he's from Germany or wherever, but it's always the same.

MH: What did you get your Ph.D. in?

WO: Horticulture, from the University of Maryland.

MH: How long did you stay in the service?

WO: I got out of the service in January of 1945, and actually, I went to college during the—the Army sent me to take engineering at VPI, and then I later ended up back in the infantry, much to my sorrow. And then, after that, I came back and finished my undergraduate work, and then I went on to Delaware for a master's degree, and then I got the Ph.D. at the University of Maryland. So, I had a very nice life later [when] I got out of the service. And there were parts of it during the service that were not bad, when I was at VPI.

MH: I was just looking on my computer so see if I have Forrest (inaudible) phone; I do. I have his phone number and his email address. I'll write and ask him. It's Captain Hazlett?

WO: It's Captain Hazlett, right.

MH: Coming back to—you taught at Clemson [University], right?

WO: Yes, I did. I taught horticulture here.

MH: Did you ever have occasion—I know it's way off the subject of horticulture, but did you ever get into discussions with your students about what you'd seen during the war?

WO: Obviously, I did. And you know, I guess you forget about things like that, I guess, but oddly enough, I had a—I had an e-mail from the Railsplitter—they've got some kind of a voicemail on it, and one of my students had answered and said that Roy Ogle was one of her old professors and that he was in the 84th Division. And she sent me the song about—oh, I can't think of the name of it, but it was a song that was put on e-mail recently for anybody to copy that wanted, where they were or—"Before They're Gone," is the name of it, yeah. (inaudible)

MH: All right, you got a second? I'll read something to you—

WO: Yeah.

MH: —that I found. Recently I was at Fort McNair in Washington D.C. at the Army Center of Military, and I was going through—they have file boxes for each of the units that were declared liberating units and the camp that they liberated. And in the Salzwedel box, there was a letter and it was written by a woman named Mrs. Alice Kransler Fulop, F-u-l-o-p, who at the time was eighty-one years old. She lived in Milwaukee. She wrote this on April 2, 1982.

And she wrote: “What did we camp prisoners perceive of the moment”—she’s talking about liberation. She said, “The SS suddenly left. We’re locked inside the barracks. An airplane circles menacingly close to the roof. Hundreds of women crouch on barren floors and contemplate imminent death, who is no stranger; and a few do hope, and so they speak. Shoots are heard sporadically, the jail keeper’s plane vanishes, and then silence, long silence. Suddenly, out of nowhere—it seems they’re out of another world—some mystical beings appear and shinny armor at the gate. All the prisoners that are able to move cry and laugh and embrace each other and shout, ‘Americans! Americans!’ The gates, the doors open. Americans! We are free! The words are shouted in innumerable languages; it forms one united choir: life. And in the name of all of us that were freed, please accept the thanks for our last thirty-seven years of life. God bless America.”

WO: That’s touching, isn’t it?

MH: I cry every time I read it.

WO: Yeah, I do, too. Well, that was us. That was the 84th, the rifle shots and all that. And believe you me, they still remember. A number of those guys that made it out finally did end up in the United States, and I’m sure you’re aware of that. Some were in California.

MH: Right.

WO: And I guess this is kind of a sequel to it, but when I went to Albany, New York, for the reunion there, they had several of those, several of the former prisoners there, and also their children. I walked upstairs with one—a young lady, probably twenty, twenty-

five, something like that: a kid. And so, she was talking to me about the 84th, and referred to me as a hero, and I told her, I said, “Now, look, I was in an anti-tank platoon. I was no hero over there,” and she says, “To me, you’re all heroes. If it were not for you, I would not be here.”

MH: And then they need a mop to wipe up the floor.

WO: Yeah, they sure do. It just touched my heartstrings when she said that, and she was a remarkable young lady, too.

MH: Yeah, I’m just making a note. Any other experiences since you came back that relate directly to this?

WO: Not really to Salzwedel, I guess. But again, just the shock of seeing those people. But, you know, it’s so much like that lady described in the letter. They were just jubilant; they were happy, you know. Life was wonderful. And she said the gates were open, but actually, by the time I got there, which maybe was twenty minutes later, the gates had been closed back up, and they were trying to protect the people. And I bet you—is she still living?

MH: No, she would be 102 or 103, and I can’t find her or her daughter in the phone book, either.

WO: Well, of course, her daughter probably wouldn’t know, either; but in any event, I can assure you that they were locked back up to protect them from, you know, just wandering off. They were just so happy. They were jubilant is the actual term for it. They were just so happy, and they were celebrating by rebelling and throwing that flour on the ground and all this sort of thing.

MH: It’s hard to imagine people in that devastating physical condition being able to have the energy to celebrate.

WO: And I’m sure it was the last ounce of energy that those people had. You know, they were just dancing around and carrying on and it was a shock.

MH: Thank you for your time. Do you happen to have a photo of yourself from World War II?

WO: Yeah, I do. I'm trying to remember—I can send you a photo, but I might have to have one made. The one I have, of course, is so similar of the era, and it's a large photo, but I could probably have—you need something for publication. What do you want, something like a glossy print?

MH: Any kind of print, as long as it's a good print. Even if there's a way to have the picture you have scanned on to a computer—you know, I don't know what access you have to the university or anything like that. But if that's possible, what I'd like is a picture of you from World War II and a picture of you today, or recent picture.

WO: Yeah, I can get you a picture of today; that's no problem at all. I got a passport picture that I can send you, but I can get one made of that other, and I will. Now, who do you want me to send this to?

MH: Okay, you got a pencil?

WO: (murmurs in agreement)

MH: It's Michael Hirsh, H-i-r-s-h.

WO: Just a second.

MH: Okay.

WO: H-i-r-s-h.

MH: Right.

WO: Michael Hirsh, yup.

MH: My address is ... and let me give you my phone number; do you have it?

WO: Yeah, please.

MH: ... Do you have e-mail?

WO: Yes, I do.

MH: What's your e-mail address, and I'll just send you something?

WO: I'm going to have to send that to you; my wife is the one that has the e-mail and I don't have it in front of me. Let's see, I do, too. Wait just a second. It's....

MH: Okay, all right. I'll send you an e-mail with my address on it so you have it there, too.

WO: Yeah, and that way I can get in touch with you by e-mail; that's even better.

MH: Okay.

WO: That sounds real good.

MH: All right. Thank you very, very much. I'll try and get in touch with Captain Hazlett.

WO: Yeah, and I just have another comment.

MH: Sure.

WO: Boy, I'm really pleased that you are doing this, and if you would please—now, I don't expect a complimentary copy—

MH: The publisher is going to send everybody I've interviewed a copy of the book.

WO: Oh, really? How nice.

MH: That's the deal that I made.

WO: But just in case that should fall through, I would like to have a notice of the title, because I want to get a hold of a copy of it.

MH: Okay, it's going to be a while.

WO: I have a real good friend, and he's a professional writer. His name is Allan Howerton.² Did you ever hear of him?

MH: No, I'm sorry, I haven't.

WO: He was a member of the 84th Infantry, and he wrote one of the finest books I've ever read, *Dear Captain et al.* I didn't know him until he wrote the book, and I bought the book and spoke to him, and he made the comment—I asked him, “Boy, you must've spent a lot of time on this,” and he said, “I took five years out of my life to write that book.”

MH: Well, this book—by the time I finish, this book will probably take two years. I've been working on it for—it's going on eight months. My deadline for the manuscript is next May [2009], and then it will be in the editing process and dealing with photos and everything else. And then the book will be out in early 2010. Why publishing takes so long, I don't know.

WO: Yeah, one of the big reasons in his case was the fact that—doing the research, which is what you're doing right now. Just take forever to do.

End of interview

² Allan Wilford Howerton wrote *Dear Captain, et al: The Agonies and the Ecstasies of War and Memory*, published in 2000 by Xlibris.