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## Eugene O'Neil oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, July 18, 2008

Eugene O'Neil (Interviewee)

Michael Hirsh (Interviewer)

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Interviewee: Eugene O'Neil (EO)  
Interviewer: Michael Hirsh (MH)  
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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.]

**Eugene O'Neil:** Eugene O'Neil, E-u-g-e-n-e O apostrophe N-e-i-l.

**Michael Hirsh:** And your address?

EO: ...

MH: And your phone number.

EO: ...

MH: And your birthday.

EO: January 9, 1926.

MH: Where you before the Army?

EO: High school.

MH: In where?

EO: Eastern High School in Washington, D.C.

MH: And how did you end up the service, drafted?

EO: Drafted.

MH: When?

EO: In 1944.

MH: You were how old?

EO: Eighteen.

MH: You finished high school?

EO: Yes. They allowed me to finish high school; they drafted me, and I was waitin' to go into the service, but they let me have a couple of months to finish high school.

MH: And where did they send you? Once they drafted you?

EO: I went to Fort McClellan, Alabama for basic training.

MH: And then take me through until you get to Europe.

EO: Well, from Fort McClellan we—actually, I came through Fort Meade, inducted at Fort Meade, Maryland, onto Fort McClellan, Alabama, for seventeen weeks infantry basic training. From there, I left and got a two-week delay in route and shipped—and

back through Fort Meade to Camp Myles Standish in Massachusetts, and we boarded ships in Boston, Massachusetts.

MH: Did you go over with the 80<sup>th</sup>?

EO: No.

MH: You were a replacement?

EO: I was a replacement, as most of us were.

MH: So you get to where—where do you land in Europe?

EO: I landed at Le Havre, France. From there, we took the 40 and 8 across France into a repo depot in Belgium.

MH: What'd you think about being put into a boxcar?

EO: I didn't think nothing about it. I didn't know what hell was—I was so young, I didn't know. It was just strange, and it was so cold, we even had to set the thing on fire, trying to light a fire in the middle of the car. We put it out.

MH: You literally set the car on fire?

EO: Right. Had to keep warm somehow. Yeah.

MH: How many guys were in the boxcar do you think?

EO: Oh, I guess maybe twenty-five or thirty, each boxcar.

MH: You had winter clothes?

EO: Yes.

MH: Because a lot of guys got sent over with summer uniforms.

EO: No, we went over in the winter; we had our whole winter clothes and so forth.

MH: So, the train takes you where?

EO: The train takes us to a repo depot, a replacement depot, in Belgium. From Belgium, I was assigned to the 80<sup>th</sup> Division and taken into the 80<sup>th</sup> Division in, I guess it was early January forty-five [1945], right at the tail end of the Bulge. And from there—and then I came into the C Company 319, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, they brought us up on trucks and dropped us off. And how I ended up in C Company, today I don't know. Because when we got in, nobody said, "Hello, goodbye, go to hell," nothin' else. Because the feeling, I think, was these guys are coming in to die, because of the rate and so forth. So, nobody wanted to make any friends and the first big battle I went into was at the Our River.

EO: Which river?

MH: The Our River, in the Luxembourg—it's the Siegfried Line, which was nothing but concrete pillboxes built into a hillside and so forth. We carried pontoon boats down to the river—and fortunately, they didn't hear us, or we would have been shelled heavily, but shelling was going on behind us. And we got into these pontoon boats—the Our River was swollen, and from what I understand, they'd opened the dikes up in the Holland area and the water was swollen and secondly from the melting snow and the rain and everything else. So it was almost like twice its size. And we went across.

I was carrying a twenty-five pound satchel of TNT and didn't know it, what they call a "pole charge." They just handed it to me and said, "Carry this." I carried it over my shoulder, so—if I'd have known what it was, it'd have been in the river, I'm sure. (MH laughs) But anyway, I got across the river. We rode in the river, which fortunately, being swolled [*sic*], it took us over the minefields there at the riverbank, which saved a lot of us. And we got off there and it was early in the morning, and we reorganized with what was left, 'cause a lot of guys went right in the river, 'cause if you went in, you were gone. There was no way to get—yeah, so we lost a lot of guys.

So, what was left, we all pulled together there, and I don't know whether it was a sergeant, a lieutenant or whom it might have been, but they said, "Man, let's get the hell

out of here.” And we went across flat ground, which was mined ground, there, and as we’re—a guy between myself and Jim (inaudible), he got killed right there. I don’t know why these minefields—we walked through. It’s unbelievable. And then we got up into the bank there and laid into the bank and Sergeant Jim Rogers, who was our squad leader, a mortar came in between him and me, and it hit him, it didn’t hit me. That was really my initiation in there.

And after I survived, we dug up in the Siegfried Line. We were pinned down for about—I’d say about five or six days there. We couldn’t get out of the foxhole and constant shelling, mortar fire. “Screaming Mimis,” they used to call them, rocket fire, and about every fifteen minutes—it was enough to blow your mind. Some guys did lose their mind there.

MH: How’d you manage to stay sane?

EO: I dunno. Just being a dumb Irishman. No, I don’t know, really. Today, there’s no explanation.

MH: Why some guys break and other guys don’t—

EO: Others don’t, you know. And why you do things and why you don’t do things, you know, and then we moved around there, I guess we moved a couple hundred yards. We went into a pillbox for a night and kinda rested up and so forth. And I moved from that pillbox probably another hundred yards, and then—

MH: Is this one of these, you know, big deep underground pillboxes?

EO: No, big concrete boxes above ground, boxes built into the ground, but above ground.

MH: With slits?

EO: Right, with slits so they can fire machine guns and also some of them had artillery pieces, so, small artillery pieces mounted inside and everything else. They had that river just zeroed in. And by the grace of God we got there, but then we went up probably another 150, 200 yards and we dug in. Well, there were some holes already there, we got in those holes. And the hole I got into had about ten to twelve inches of water in it. So,

we took the iron pod hat—helmet, if you want to call it—and sat on those, held each other's feet up as best we could out of the water there.

And there was a pillbox over here and across the river there were some U.S. tanks, so I guess they were 75mm tanks, firing on the pillbox. And as soon as they started firing, they would come out, and as soon as they'd stop, they'd go back in. And then we'd be kept pinned down by machine gun fire. And so—I don't remember so much of it. But from there we went—moved a little bit, and I guess another—I got my feet wet and I got my feet frozen at that time—fortunately, not serious; some of my friends lost their feet with trench foot from it. But moved into a pillbox to spend the night—I was outpostting it, and I was relieved by a replacement, and the next morning, he was dead, there. That's the difference between God being on your shoulder or not on your shoulder, that's all I can say.

And then we moved out there. As we were moving out towards—I think it was Saarbrücken, and as we were there, captured towns and so forth and captured a lot of prisoners. And Paul Stafford and myself were assigned to bring back a bunch of prisoners; we must have had several hundred prisoners we were bringing back. We got 'em back to the rear and I told Paul, "I can't go no further." And I went to the medics for my feet. And they checked it out; fortunately, they were frozen, but not damaged. I got three days in the kitchen to thaw them out, then back up to the line again, and then never missed another day to the end of the war.

MH: At what point do you know anything about the Holocaust? About the death camps, that sort of thing.

EO: Actually, I don't think—I'd heard of them, but I had no idea. The first time I ever really [knew] is when we took Buchenwald. Yeah. We took that camp and we saw the horror of the people, how they were treated.

MH: Tell me about the approach to Buchenwald. What was going on that day?

EO: That's a—

MH: It's only sixty-three years ago.

EO: That's all. If I remember, we were—we were just moving out as infantry does, you know, and so forth. I don't know if we were on trucks, off and on, walkin'. And then, I

remember near Kassel, I remember Erfurt here, right here. And for some reason, I believe, if I'm right, between Erfurt and Jena, which is just this side of Weimar, our trucks got ambushed. And a machine gun opened up on it and it hit the truck I was on, and it hit the guy sittin' next to me in the leg, and I know his leg later on—his name was Sergeant Glenn (inaudible)—was amputated there. Must have hit an artery or something. And then we started walking again from there, and I think we walked into the Weimar area there.

MH: So, you come into Weimar—

EO: Well, we came in the outskirts of Weimar. We did not go into the city of Weimar, we was on the outskirts of Weimar. We stayed pretty much on the highway—we call it the beltway, but I forgot what they call it over there. But pretty much on there.

MH: The autobahn?

EO: The autobahn, yeah. Pretty much. And we pulled up into Weimar, and all I remember is standing outside the camp and seeing these guys—

MH: The camp is right at Weimar? Or it's miles away?

EO: It was just a few miles outside of Weimar.

MH: Okay, so what's your first sight of the camp?

EO: I guess it was first—standing in front, standing outside of the camp at one of the entrances there and so forth.

MH: And what do you see?

EO: All I saw was a bunch of—a lot of men who were nothing but skin and bones. The smell was real bad. And beyond that, I didn't go into the camp. Some of the guys had gotten into the camp and went into it, and so I have a couple pictures home of it, that was taken by one of the guys.

MH: Picture of you there?

EO: No, not of me, but of the bodies being stacked up and everything.

MH: Did you throw up?

EO: No. I mean, so much horror—one thing after another.

MH: I've talked to guys, and there's people who said just that, that they'd seen so much death and so much horror that this is just one more—on a different scale, but just one more. And there were other people who just couldn't handle the camp, the sight, and just lost it.

EO: Well, you gotta realize the difference between an infantryman and some of the other guys that came in. The guys that came in afterwards and did the police work and did the cleanup and so forth like that were not combat troops, per se; they were strictly the support troops like the MPs and things like that that come in along behind you. Yeah. But when the infantry hits something, they get them out as quick as they can, particularly in a situation like that. So, it's very easy to have someone go ape and open up on—yeah. But I mean, other than that there, that's about all I really remember of it. I can picture those human beings there with nothing but flesh and bones, which was one of the most horrible sights that you could see. I didn't know and didn't understand the full horror of the camp until after the war was over.

MH: How did that come to you, after the war?

EO: Well, they—we heard about Buchenwald, Dachau, Auschwitz, and these different camps you would hear about, and that's—and *Stars and Stripes* came out with some printing and stuff like that.

MH: Did it change the way you dealt with the German soldiers, the SS people?

EO: Not really. I mean I don't ever recall hating—I never hate. I never knew what hate was and still don't. Don't understand that.

MH: There were other guys whose reaction was—several had told me, “After we saw that and after Malmédy, we didn’t take prisoners.”

EO: I know of situations—we took prisoners, but I do know a situation later on, outside of—what was the town?—Jena. Captain Scott of B Company the night before got killed, and I know they took some troops out and retaliated. I didn’t see it, but I saw some of the troops. Because that next day, I was second scout going into the woods in the Jena area. You’re out here fifty yards in front of everybody else, and you’re either gonna be a good target or they’re going to let you get through and wipe out everybody else, you know. But that’s the main thing I remember.

MH: When did you get back home to the U.S.?

EO: June of forty-six [1946].

MH: Could you tell that you were a different person? Or did other people like your family tell you you were a different person?

EO: I was just a kid. I was only twenty years old. I do realize later in years that it took me ten years to get my head on straight. I was restless. I didn’t know what I wanted to do or anything else. I got married—fortunately the marriage stayed together—in forty-seven [1947], going from one job to the other. I enlisted in the Naval Reserve in forty-seven [1947], got called back in Korea for two years with the Navy from fifty [1950] to fifty-two [1952].

I had a couple of years left on that enlistment, and a good friend of mine, my best buddy, came back from Korea and was up on the chosen reserved there with a M.A.S.H. [Mobile Army Surgical Hospital] unit, and they were setting up a M.A.S.H. unit in D.C., and he was getting a commission and he told me, “You got a couple years yet to go; would you come over and serve in the Guard with me as supply sergeant?” which I did. Then I got caught in the recession of fifty-four [1954] to fifty-seven [1957], fifty-eight [1958] and I was—I was selling at the time with a big company out of Baltimore, but they had a Washington office and they closed the Washington office. I wouldn’t go to Baltimore.

So, I gave that up, and then I took a job with the D.C. Air National Guard, so I was in the Air Corps. And in 1955, I think it was, as a Supply Specialist GS-5, and during that period of time, I wrote a clerk’s exam in the federal government, at GS-3, which is the only way I could get into the federal government. I passed that and got to the federal government. And in fifty-eight [1958], they were starting to call up for Vietnam again,

and drafting a call, and I was facing another recall for Vietnam. And I thought about it and so forth. I had two children, another one on the way, and my career was starting—I thought it was what proved to be my career was developing. And so I dropped and got out after fourteen years in the reserves, Guard, the military. That's basically my career there.

But it's hard to say—I mean, I went to college for a while. I'd go a semester or so and get tired of it and walk away from it. I couldn't get a decent job anyplace, really, but I worked. And my wife was working, very fortunately. But once I got the break (inaudible) in the government, I went to the very top. I retired a GS-14 in Step 8. The highest you could go was a fifteen, and I turned fifteen down for the simple reason I had a nice office of seven people and they wanted me to take over a buying branch of 100 people. And if you know in the seventies [1970s] and eighties [1980s], you had many, many problems with affirmative action, equal opportunity and whatever, you know. You try to boss 100 people; you're fighting more of the problems of society than you are doing the work that you're supposed to do.

But that's really, basically, for me. My philosophy in life has been, I guess, in the right place at the right time. That's why I survived, I think. And I pass that same philosophy on to my children: work hard and be in the right place at the right time, things will fall in place. I know friends of mine with master's and doctorate degrees that never got as high as I have with just a high school education. I finally ended up equivalent of two years of college. But pass on information: I spent my younger years in Catholic grammar—elementary school, under the nuns. They taught me to read and write and arithmetic, and from that—

MH: And to behave.

EO: And, well, discipline was there. Discipline was not only there, it was at home. If I got corrected by a nun at school—

MH: You got double at home.

EO: I got it double at home. There was nothing—I had no claim against society, you know, but that was the way we were raised, very strict, but our mother was home with us. And my dad only had a fourth grade education; my mother only had an eighth grade education. My dad was a sheet metal worker. I mean, I know hard times in the thirties [1930s]: we almost lost our home, didn't know where the next meal was from. Dad was in the hospital from being in World War I, my uncle was the chief engineer at the Naval Hospital, and he got my dad in the Naval Hospital. But there was no benefits in those days, for any of us. And my family, mother's family—my father's family came to our

aid, and that's what saved our home and put food on our table. But you don't hear of that today.

MH: Did you have nightmares about the war?

EO: Oh, once in a while. Not really. The worst thing I have, even today, is shell—any kind of explosion going off, if it's at the right angle, then it bothers me. Sittin' at the ball game with my wife and my grandson—my grandson has real tender ears and so forth—and settin' off the fireworks. The first couple blasts went off, I got shook up, and she grabbed me and grabbed him. But I still, every once in a while, will get an effect from an explosion of some kind that just seems to trigger it. But other than that, I don't think that other than being restless—I grew up as a kid as a family, with a family, and I hadn't—I grew up in hardship. I grew up in an Irish Catholic family. And there was just four of us, six with Mother and Father. But it was—

MH: There are four kids?

EO: No, I have four.

MH: But when you were growing up?

EO: Growing up, actually there was five of us, but my sister, youngest sister, didn't come along until 1940. But during the thirties [1930s], there were really four of us. I have two older sisters and a younger brother. Other than that there, but I worked with—I went to work for GSA [General Services Administration] as a GS-5 in 1958, and by 1970 I was a Grade 14, which in those days was very difficult to obtain. But I could—I had a photographic memory. That was the difference, even recalling this back, at this age. But I had a photographic memory, and it just helped me get through everything, and so forth: once I heard something, and if it impressed me, it stayed. I never lost it. That's the big difference. But other than that there, I had no gripes at all. They say we're the greatest generation, but when you think about it, maybe we are. But I think you now have coming—I think today you have another great generation.

MH: Why do you say that?

EO: I have a lot of respect for the young people, particularly those in Iraq and so forth. I've attended reunions put on by the 80<sup>th</sup> there and so forth, and these guys coming back from Afghanistan, Iraq, and places like that, and the job they do and everything. I

understand warfare much better than the press understands it. If two men get killed, that's a big story. In the area I live, around D.C. in the metropolitan area, we have ten, twelve, fifteen killed every weekend. But that's not warfare, but—we have more people killed in our area than they have killed in Iraq or Afghanistan. That's not news because that's around every big city.

MH: You couldn't get out of that neighborhood.

EO: You can't run. I don't care where you go, rich neighborhood, poor neighborhood, or in between. That hasn't got anything to do with it. You're always going to—the biggest problem you have today is dope, which they don't talk about it. It's the biggest problem they have in Afghanistan is the poppy crop and the black market on that. And as long as that big money's being made on that, you're going to have the problem that you have. But you won't hear that. That's my opinion, anyway.

MH: They've talked about it—they've said, I guess the last two years the crop has increased, I don't know, by 20 percent, by 30 percent. They thought they had a way of getting it under control, but they don't.

EO: It's all being black marketed through Pakistan, up in that area.

MH: Our allies.

EO: Right. Who knows? I have to depend on the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Defense and the President of the United States for their judgment on that type of thing. And they know everything that's going on, we only know piecemeal. But I respect—the 80<sup>th</sup> today is the reserve training unit for the whole United States Army Reserve and everything there. They just changed commands. We're going to have General [John P.] McLaren here, who's now taken command of that; he'll be here, maybe in today. And they tell you a whole different story, stories that I hear that boys and girls are going to school together over there. That never happened. Women in the workforce, and in politics, that never happened.

MH: But it went like this, then you had that, and then it started dropping off again.

EO: Well, but the 80<sup>th</sup> (inaudible) Company, the 80<sup>th</sup> Reserve unit, they went over there; they trained the police and the army.

MH: Talking about Iraq or Afghanistan?

EO: Iraq. And I've attended a couple of their reunions and stuff. They're an amazing, good bunch of young people. I'm very proud of them. This is something here—I think you—"80<sup>th</sup> division take Weimar. Germans fail to resist Yanks."

MH: Is this *Stars and Stripes*?

EO: This is *Stars and Stripes* put out in forty-five [1945], I think it was. This was put out in 1945, right after the war was over. It's the Blue Ridge that was put out there, it has the Ardennes on—have you seen this paper?

MH: No.

EO: I'll get Celia to make you a copy if she can.

MH: That would be great.

EO: I'll give you a copy of it. See, we captured Hitler's hideout, there—let's see if there's anything further.

***End of interview***