

May 2009

Charles T. Payne oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, May 20, 2009

Charles Payne (Interviewee)

Michael Hirsh (Interviewer)

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[**Transcriber's Note:** Ellipsis indicates interviewee's personal information.]

(phone rings)

Charles T. Payne: Hello.

Michael Hirsh: Hello, Mr. Payne, it's Michael Hirsh.

CP: Okay.

MH: Is this a good time? Are you finished with dinner?

CP: Yup.

MH: Okay. I've got a recorder going. Could you give me your full name and spell it for me please?

CP: My name is Charles—you want that spelled?

MH: No, that I know.

CP: Thomas, middle name; Payne, P-a-y-n-e.

MH: And your address, please?

CP: ...

MH: Your phone is...And what's your date of birth, sir?

CP: February 16, 1925.

MH: When did you—where did you grow up?

CP: In Augusta, Kansas.

MH: Is that where you were when you went into the service?

CP: Yes.

MH: Were you drafted, or enlisted?

CP: Well, this was 1943. I knew—we all knew we were going into the service, you know, when we graduated from high school. And at that point, everything went in through the Selective Service System, so there was—except for, I think, the Air Force, which was then part of the Army but operated separately. I think everything else went in through the draft. And so, at the time we graduated, some friends of mine and I went down to the Selective Service office in our town and said, “Okay, we’re ready to go,” in effect volunteering. And the lady, who I knew, said, “Don’t you worry your head about it, honey, you’re on the next list.”

MH: (laughs)

CP: So, whether I volunteered or was drafted, I’m not sure.

MH: It was a matter of just a few days.

CP: Yes.

MH: So, where'd you take basic training?

CP: North Pampa, Texas, in the summer of forty-three [1943]. It was god-awful.

MH: Because of the weather down there, I assume.

CP: Yes.

MH: And when did you get to the 89th [Infantry] Division?

CP: I was in special training. Between basic training and the 89th, I was in a special training unit that was essentially going to college. But that only lasted a few months, and then—

MH: That was the ASTP [Army Specialized Training Program] program?

CP: Yeah. And then we went to—I went to the 89th Division.

MH: And where were they stationed at the time?

CP: At Hunter-Liggett Military Reservation in California.

MH: In California. And how long were you there before you got orders to go overseas?

CP: Well, it was quite a long time. We were doing maneuvers at Hunter-Liggett in very rough territory, doing maneuvers as a light division, which meant we carried everything on our back. And by the time they decided that probably didn't work very well and called it quits, then we went across to Camp Butner, North Carolina, and trained as a standard

infantry division. And then in December of forty-four [1944], we went to Boston, the port of embarkation, and shipped out from there.

MH: What regiment were you in?

CP: You have to understand, this is sixty-some years ago.

MH: Right.

CP: And until all this came up recently, I hadn't thought about it probably in thirty years. So, I have trouble with some of it.

MH: Believe me, sir, I understand. As I think I left in the phone message, I've interviewed now about—something over 150 men and six women who were at the various camps.

CP: I think it was the 355th [Regiment].

MH: Okay.

CP: Company K, I'm sure. I've sort of lost the structure of the Army now. We were in, I think, the third battalion of the 355th. I forget how many Company Ks there were.

MH: I've probably got all that information somewhere else, anyhow. Where did you land in Europe?

CP: Well, we were supposed to land in England. We were supposed to go to England, and all of our equipment shipped there. And the last two days we were on the ocean, the Navy was out shooting off depth charges pretty much around the clock. The story was—they didn't consult me, but the story was because of the U-boats, we went into Le Havre. It was clear when we got to Le Havre, they weren't prepared for us. So, we sat on the ship in the harbor. It'd been heavily bombed, and there were really no port facilities functioning. We sat in the harbor for I forget how long, and then they landed us on one of those little boats where the front end drops down. They have a name, which I can't come up with.

MH: They were landing craft.

CP: Yeah, landing craft. Okay.

MH: LCP or something [Landing Craft, Vehicle, Personnel].

CP: So, we went—it was bitterly, bitterly cold in Le Havre: ice and snow all over everything. And we went—we were landed in the landing craft which, unfortunately had about, I don't know, four to six inches of water in the bottom, so we landed with wet feet in the bitter cold. We were taken by truck in the middle of the night and dumped in a field, covered by snow, with nothing, except there was a pile of tents, which hadn't been put up yet. And we essentially that night created Camp Lucky Strike. It was one of the most painful episodes of my life. It was a night when grown men cried.

MH: And this was even before combat.

CP: Yeah. And because all our equipment was in England, we stayed there, and we put up the tents and we tried to sleep there, and we tried to keep from freezing to death. And we stayed—I think it must have been a couple of weeks before we got our equipment from England. Meanwhile, the snowy fields had turned into muck, frozen muck that we walked in. Everybody had cold, wet feet, and a large number of people had frozen toes and would disappear from our roster. I had—my toenails after that turned black, and the toenails underneath grew in all crooked and washboardy. It took about two years to grow out normal toenails again.

But we moved from there to across France to—this is as much as I can tell you, because I frequently didn't know where we were. We were not allowed to have maps or guidebooks, or anything that would give away any information if we were captured. No cameras, nothing of that sort.

MH: Did you know about the Battle of the Bulge at that point?

CP: I cannot now remember exactly when it was. I knew about it, but I'm not sure from what source. We were said to be headed for that, but didn't. We were in [George] Patton's army, which didn't quite ever get there.

MH: Had they told you anything about the concentration camps or death camps or the Holocaust?

CP: You know, I can't remember. We had all kinds of training films and things like that about, you know, the evil Nazis and the evil Japanese and that sort of thing. But whether there was any information about things like concentration camps, I simply don't remember.

MH: Okay. When did you see your first combat?

CP: Well, in my mind—I'm not sure where it was, but it was somewhere close to the intersection of the boundaries of France and Germany and Luxembourg. Although I believe—I think we were frequently—we didn't even know what country we were in. We moved around and back and forth. My first memory right now of combat was—I don't know; it was in the woods somewhere. And we were moving. We were moving up and could hear—there'd been a pretty fierce fire, which we could hear for some time. And as we came upon it, I remember seeing the first dead body I'd ever seen that was outside of a casket. And it was an American soldier who had been shot, machine gunned and fallen back, and an American tank had run over his head. There were also some dead Germans, you know, in that immediate vicinity.

MH: You're at this point what, a nineteen-year-old kid, just about to turn twenty.

CP: Let's see, I was born—

MH: You said you were born in—

CP: —in twenty-five [1925], so in forty-five [1945] I'd turned twenty.

MH: You turned twenty. So, how does an almost-twenty-year-old deal with this?

CP: Well, one views it and is glad you weren't in the middle of it when it happened. It was so fresh. Nothing had been touched. Nobody had done anything with any of the bodies. And that wasn't our job, so we just went on past, and that's my memory of that.

MH: Were you a rifleman?

CP: No, I was in a mortar squad. Shortly—on the Moselle [River], I think, when we were on the Moselle, which was not too long after that, I was transferred to the head—I guess it was regimental headquarters company, although I wouldn't swear money or bet money on that now—to a telephone wire-laying crew, which operated pretty much independently from the rest of the troops. Their charge was to make sure there was telephone communication with Headquarters wherever they stopped for the night. There were four guys who were telephone technicians and could climb poles and splice and do all that. And I was there to guard them; I was their guard. So, from then on through much of the war, I was with that crew. It was five of us in a Jeep, and much of the time we were out of touch with anybody else.

MH: Did you view that as a good assignment? You know, out of the infantry?

CP: Well, I was—I guess, you know, naturally somewhat scared going into combat and all of that. I really didn't like being taken away from my unit, where I had friends and comfortable feelings, into something new. But then, it turned out that this was very adventurous, and I really enjoyed a lot of it.

MH: Do you recall when you got the sense that the tide had turned and the Germans were on the run?

CP: After we crossed the Rhine [River].

MH: Okay. Did you cross in boats or on a bridge?

CP: On Navy-operated landing craft. I mean, it was the U.S. Navy. It was down there on the Rhine; I was always amazed by that. And we went across; we weren't the first ones across. The landing craft, when they came back to the west side, would bring back the wounded from the fighting on the other side. And that was pretty frightening, to see people burned by napalm and badly shot up.

MH: What was your rank at that point?

CP: I was a PFC [private first class]. That was the highest rank I ever achieved in three years in the Army.

MH: So, you got across the Rhine, and then what happens?

CP: Well, across the Rhine, we had a wonderful adventure that wasn't war-like at all, in that our crew—our wire-laying crew, the five of us in the Jeep—went down to a town like twenty miles south of where we were, and we went past the whole castles on the Rhine area, which is fantastic. We didn't see a German or a soldier or anybody during the trip. We got to a town where we were hooking up telephone communications, and didn't see a German. Wherever they were, they were hiding.

MH: Civilians as well, or just—?

CP: Hmm?

MH: Are you referring—you didn't see German civilians, either?

CP: No.

MH: Really?

CP: It was like going into a ghost town. Then they started shelling, the German 88s, the big artillery.

MH: Yes.

CP: And they were shelling the town, except they were missing, and all of them landed in the Rhine right over beyond where we were. So, we stopped paying attention to that. Other than that, it was really a neat experience.

MH: I know it's—I'm a Vietnam veteran, and I can understand when you say that strange things that take you completely away from the war can happen in the middle of a war.

CP: Yeah.

MH: So, I understand that.

CP: Well, I think being on that telephone crew probably contributed to more experiences like that. You know, I'm not sure how much I should be telling you. I'm not sure how much you want; I'm not sure what you want.

MH: Well, I'm working my way up to Ohrdruf, but I really want to know what you went through before you got there.

CP: There was, you know, the time on the Moselle when we liberated wine from a wine cellar, under machine gun fire, in a baby buggy.

MH: (laughs)

CP: There were wonderful, funny experiences as well.

MH: Right. How long did the effects of that wine last?

CP: Hmm?

MH: How long did the effects of that wine last?

CP: Well, I was very sick that night.

MH: I see. (laughs)

CP: (laughs) And I was guarding the—whatever they call. The Germans had patrols out; they were cutting telephone wires and such. Our telephone crew was out almost all night, and I was out, of course, guarding them. But I was so sick that it was a good thing we didn't run into any enemy.

MH: Were you ever wounded during your time in the war?

CP: No. Well, I was never wounded. I was damaged by the cold, but that was back in France, and even today my fingers and toes can't handle cold.

MH: Which is pretty rough, living on...in Chicago.

CP: You aren't kidding. Long as I keep walking, I'm okay.

MH: I see.

CP: I can't stand around or go to football games or anything like that.

MH: Yeah, Soldier Field is not a good place to be.

CP: That's right.

MH: So, tell me about coming to Ohrdruf. How did that happen?

CP: Well, after we crossed the Rhine, we were moving along—we went north of that industrial area, Frankfurt and in there; we went across north of there. I think we could see that they were burning, the fires in the south of where we went along the highway. Then we went on this—I think it's like a main highway across—and remember, I didn't have any maps.

MH: I understand.

CP: I was never totally sure except for road signs where we were. But, you know, it was like Erfurt and Gotha and Weimar, that sort of run across south Germany in some order or other from west to east.

MH: From west to east, yes.

CP: We were going although that, and the road signs—you know, the kilometers to Berlin kept getting smaller, so I thought we were going to Berlin. I was kind of disappointed when we turned east and didn't go.

(referring to unknown noise) Was that you or me?

MH: It's not me. So, you—

CP: So, we went across. Then, when we got to Ohrdruf, there were—well, this wasn't the first time, but I remember there were just like hundreds of displaced—I guess displaced people is the wrong word—hundreds of people who had been inmates in the prison. They were out loose, wandering around.

MH: Ohrdruf was liberated on April 4.

CP: All I can remember was it was no longer cold. So, it was in the spring sometime.

MH: And I know [Dwight] Eisenhower came there with Patton and several other generals on April 12. And I believe—from other guys I've talked to, the 89th was there just before Eisenhower got there, 'cause at least one person that I talked to from the 89th was there when he was there.

CP: I didn't see that. I would have loved to have seen them, but I didn't. And I'm not sure whether they were there before or after I was, but I think it was the same day.

MH: What did you see—I mean, what'd you do? You got orders to go see—?

CP: The thing is, when I was there, all the dead bodies were still just lying there and nothing had been touched. It was—you know, it wasn't several days later.

MH: Right, there was—they had almost an ellipse of dead bodies at the gate that had been shot in the head.

CP: Yeah. Well, they'd been shot by a machine gun. Maybe in the head, I'm not sure. But you could see where the machine gun had been behind the hedges. And all of the people in their rags—totally emaciated, starved near to death—had their tin cups and came out for food and then been shot. There was sort of like a circle of them there.

MH: How do you deal with that when you see it?

CP: Well, I don't know—

(referring to unknown noise) Am I doing something to make noises here? I'm getting beeping.

MH: I don't know whether you have call waiting or somebody's trying to call you or not.

CP: Oh. Well—all right.

MH: I was asking you—I mean, you get an assignment—

CP: How do I deal with it?

MH: Yeah. You're told to go up and see this camp.

CP: To go—we went to see it. I've been interviewed here a number of times because of Barack's [Barack Obama] trip, scheduled trip.¹ The Germans have been after me for like a week now. You know, I don't want to get all into the thing of just repeating the same words over and over again.

MH: I understand.

CP: You want what I remember—

MH: I want what you remember inside Ohrdruf, what you remember.

CP: What I remember: I remember the gate, and I remember the dead person square in the middle of the gate with his head beat in. It had been one of the prisoners who'd gone over to the Nazis and become a guard for the Nazis. Then, when the Americans came, he

¹ Referring to President Obama's trip to Germany, including Buchenwald, in June 2009. Charles Payne is Barack Obama's great-uncle, the younger brother of his maternal grandmother.

had tried to blend in with the inmates, and they recognized him and killed him on the spot. I remember not very far inside the front gate was where all these people had been machine-gunned and killed. And not too much further in were, like, some sheds in which bodies, stripped bodies, had been thrown in and stacked up and covered with lime. And they were so emaciated, there was nothing but skin over bones. It was clear that—I guess most of them died of starvation.

MH: How do you process this yourself, seeing all this?

CP: Well, it was in the middle of the war. I guess I had become able to see all kinds of horrible things and keep going. And this is horrible. I mean, to me, was this more horrible—except in numbers—than the dead soldier whose head had been run over by a tank?

MH: I understand.

CP: There was a lot of it. And I guess I handled it. I mean, I kept going.

MH: Did you—were you there at the point where they were bringing in German civilians to start burying people?

CP: I was there that day. There were signs at that point that the military, like medical people, were trying to deal with all of the survivors who were, most of them, in the state of advanced starvation. And it was pretty clear a lot of them would die in spite of treatment.

Well, then we moved on, and we went on to the end of the war. And at the end of the war, we—well, at some point there we were—Patton went south and into Austria. And we were—our division was attached to the 6th—I think it was 6th Army—and we went straight across on the north side of Austria and Czechoslovakia and ended up on the Elbe [River]—or near the Elbe; I never actually saw the Elbe—and near Dresden.

MH: You were waiting for the Russians.

CP: We were close to the Russians, but we never saw any. And we were over there, and we stayed there like for two weeks, I think—I'm guessing. We stayed there for a while, but it wasn't a long while. And then we moved back. We were shipped back, would you believe, to Ohrdruf again. All, or most of, the territory between Ohrdruf and the Elbe was

then given to the Russians. But we stayed then in Ohrdruf. And I actually did guard duty on the same camp, which had become a processing center for displaced people. So, every day, truckloads of people would come in and truckloads of people would go out. But in order to stabilize the place, we had a military guard around the perimeter, and I, being a PFC, was part of the guard duty there.

MH: Did you ever see any of the German telecommunications network that they had dug underneath Ohrdruf? They had what amounted to another bunker with all their communications stuff, in the event that Hitler had to leave Berlin.

CP: I did not. In fact, they said they had a place where they burned bodies.

MH: Yes.

CP: I didn't see that. I never actually went more than—I don't know, maybe 100 yards into the camp.

MH: Did you have any personal interaction with any of the survivors?

CP: I did, and I've told this story to other people. But on guard duty, one day there was this person; I believe he was Polish, and probably Jewish, but I don't know either of those for sure. We did not have a common language; we both knew a little bit of pidgin German, but that was all. And I was on guard duty for whatever period of time, and he came and wanted to talk. So, we talked and just stood there and talked. And what he wanted to tell me, if I understood it, was that the Germans had killed like a million Jews and nobody knew about it. And he just thought it was important to get the word out, so he was talking to anybody he could talk to tell them about this. And I think that was what he was saying; but as I say, we didn't have a common language.

MH: Did you notice a change of attitude among American soldiers after they saw Ohrdruf, a change in attitude toward the Germans?

CP: I don't remember that. I'd have to say we never had—we were well conditioned, I think, to not have good feelings toward the Germans from the beginning.

MH: Right, but—

CP: And there was the non-fraternization rule. We were—it was a court-martial offense to fraternize with German civilians. That was in effect the entire time the war was on and we were in Germany. I think it was probably mostly intended to keep soldiers away from the German girls.

MH: Didn't always work so well.

CP: Didn't always work. But it was also to keep soldiers from befriending Germans, or Germans befriending soldiers.

MH: When did you finally come home from Europe?

CP: Well, let's see. After we were at Ohrdruf, which was I don't remember how long, because we were late coming to the scene—we weren't there for D-Day—our division was scheduled to go to Japan. So, we were shipped back from Ohrdruf to Camp Lucky Strike again at Le Havre. And while we were there, you know, the atomic bombs went off and the war—well, the whole war ended in Japan. So, our trip to the Orient was cancelled.

And, again, because we had low priority, we were kept as army of occupation and we were shipped to Austria. So, I spent the winter after the war in Steyr, Austria, also on the Steyr River. On the other side was the Russian zone of Austria. At that time, Austria was split up just like Germany was: four zones. And, again, even though they were across the river, we never saw any Russians. I never saw a Russian the entire time I was there.

MH: So, you got back to the States in what, mid-forty-six [1946]?

CP: I got back to the States in—yeah, the spring of forty-six [1946].

MH: Did you go back home to Kansas?

CP: I went back home to Kansas.

MH: And went to college?

CP: I went GI bill and got a degree in chemical engineering from Kansas State.

MH: Okay. What ultimately brought you to Chicago?

CP: Well, it was—you know, when I graduated, the year before everybody had six job offers and could take their pick. The year I graduated, it was just like they were talking on the news tonight about graduates this year. There aren't any jobs. So, I ended up with a job I didn't really like, doing stuff I didn't really like in an area in west Texas I didn't really like. And so, I eventually made connections and went to the University of Chicago as a graduate student in the graduate library school, and got into computers and libraries. And did some early original work, pioneering work in library automation in the 1960s and seventies [1970s].

MH: When did you marry?

CP: When did I marry?

MH: Yes.

CP: I married in 1963.

MH: And children?

CP: I have one son, who's now, I think, forty.

MH: At what point did you tell your—if you did. Did you tell your wife and son about what you had seen in Ohrdruf?

CP: You know, I don't know that I ever did; maybe. I've never really liked to talk about it. I like to tell more interesting or fun or funny stories. So, everybody's heard all my war stories about liberating a baby buggy full of wine and that sort of thing. I don't know that anybody's heard much about the grim part of it.

MH: Can you tell whether—I know from my own personal experience that once you've been in a war, you come back a different person than the person who went over. That, I understand. I just wonder if you could sort out and say whether being at Ohrdruf and seeing that aspect of it had any impact on you that you can recall in later life.

CP: You know, I don't think I can sort it out like that.

MH: Okay.

CP: I had some problems, you know, becoming a civilian again. But my guess is most everybody did.

MH: Were you able to get help adjusting, or was there no help?

CP: I don't know that I would even ever have tried.

MH: Okay. When we first began talking, you said you hadn't talked about this in thirty years. What was it that brought this up thirty years ago?

CP: Hmm?

MH: When we first began talking on the phone tonight, you said that you hadn't thought about Ohrdruf for thirty years.

CP: Yeah.

MH: I just wondered, did something happen thirty years ago?

CP: No, that was just—I could have said fifty years.

MH: Oh, okay. Sorry for being a literalist.

CP: No, what brought it up was Barack's misspeaking about whatever—²

MH: About Auschwitz, yeah.

CP: Yeah. And that brought it up.

MH: If he goes to Germany, is this something you want to do?

CP: I have no knowledge of the trip to Germany.

MH: Okay. All right. Anything else that comes to mind, with respect to Ohrdruf, that you can think of?

CP: I don't think so.

MH: Do you happen to have a picture of yourself from World War II?

CP: I lost all of my pictures somewhere, in a move somewhere around 1960 or before. I lost all of my pictures. I don't have anything prior to that.

MH: Okay. My last question: I'm actually coming up to Chicago for my mother's ninetieth birthday. She actually lived probably right around the corner from where you live. ...But she's now living in a retirement place...and we're coming up for her ninetieth birthday. And I wonder if it would be possible when I get up there for me to call you and see if I could come over and just take your picture, so I can use a current picture of you in the book.

CP: Okay. Well, you can get a picture of me from the [*Chicago*] *Tribune*, I think. I don't know how this works. They took a bunch of pictures of me when I did an interview with the *Tribune*.³ I have resisted doing any television interviews because I'm not comfortable doing that.

² This refers to a May 26, 2008 campaign speech in New Mexico. Obama stated that his uncle "...was part of the first American troops to go into Auschwitz and liberate the concentration camps." Since Auschwitz was actually liberated by the Soviet troops, he was widely criticized for this remark.

³ This article, "Obama relative recalls World War II horror," was written by John McCormick and ran in the May 8, 2009 edition.

MH: Okay.

CP: And I did an interview with *Der Spiegel*.⁴

MH: How'd that go?

CP: Well, it was kind of fun, actually. They—a couple of Germans from their Washington office, who—you could almost see they're carrying their German guilt about all of this. (laughs) But they were born well after all of it, so it was kind of interesting.

MH: Okay. Well—I can try talking to the *Tribune*, but usually they charge a lot of money for pictures.

CP: Oh, okay. Well, you can come and take my picture if you'd like.

MH: I would really appreciate that, sir. Thank you very much for taking the time to talk with me.

CP: Okay.

MH: I appreciate it.

CP: All right.

MH: You take care.

CP: Bye.

MH: Bye-bye.

End of interview

⁴ This interview, “*Spiegel* interview with Obama’s great-uncle,” was conducted shortly before Michael Hirsh’s, and appeared in the May 26, 2009 edition.