

July 2008

Warren Emerson Priest oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, July 18, 2008

Warren E. Priest (Interviewee)

Michael Hirsh (Interviewer)

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Scholar Commons Citation

Priest, Warren E. (Interviewee) and Hirsh, Michael (Interviewer), "Warren Emerson Priest oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, July 18, 2008" (2008). *Digital Collection - Holocaust & Genocide Studies Center Oral Histories*. Paper 120.
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Concentration Camp Liberators Oral History Project
Oral History Program
Florida Studies Center
University of South Florida, Tampa Library

Digital Object Identifier: C65-00109
Interviewee: Warren Emerson Priest (WP)
Interviewer: Michael Hirsh (MH)
Interview dates: July 18, 2008; November 29, 2008
Interview location: Conducted by telephone
Transcribed by: Kathy Kirkland
Transcription date: November 16, 2008
Audit Edit by: Mary Beth Isaacson, MLS
Audit Edit date: May 24, 2010 to May 25, 2010
Final Edit by: Dorian L. Thomas
Final Edit date: June 7, 2010

[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: Could you give me your full name and spell it for me, please?

Warren Emerson Priest: Yeah. Warren Emerson Priest, W-a-r-r-e-n E-m-e-r-s-o-n P-r-i-e-s-t.

MH: And your address, please?

WP: ...

MH: And your phone number is.... Your email address is.... And your date of birth, sir?

WP: April 6, 1922.

MH: Which makes you how old now?

WP: Well, I'm in my eighty-seventh year.

MH: Okay. First, could you just tell me about yourself before you went in the Army, where you grew up?

WP: Well, I grew up in a small town in New Hampshire—Plaistow, New Hampshire—and I went to Haverhill High School.

MH: The town was what?

WP: Haverhill, where we had moved when I was in the fourth grade. I graduated from Haverhill High School; I got a full scholarship to BU [Boston University], which I started in the fall of 1940. And then, the experience of the induction into the war: December 31, 1941.

MH: What did your family do, your parents?

WP: Well, my mother was a single parent, and she struggled to keep her four kids under a common roof. Took in lady boarders, some more or less convalescent, and kept us clothed and fed, which in that time was not a particularly difficult thing, because we didn't expect much, and we didn't get much. It was customary for us to go around in the summer months in a bathing suit and barefoot. That was the middle of the Depression.

MH: Right. Did you enlist, or were you drafted in the army?

WP: Oh, I was drafted.

MH: What year was that?

WP: Nineteen forty-one.

MH: Forty-one [1941]. Where did they send you?

WP: Initially, to a camp in Massachusetts—I forget it now—but then I went down to Miami [Florida], Collins Avenue, for training, basic training; then up to New Jersey, Atlantic City. Then I was selected to attend Fordham University as part of the Army Specialized Training Program, to major in German. I was to be part of a group that would

be probably, at the end of the war, involved with occupation, administration, that sort of stuff.

MH: How long did you stay at Fordham?

WP: It was a nine-month learning experience. Everybody had to leave at the end of the nine months to go elsewhere, because they finished what they wanted to have us learn. I left Fordham to go to Camp Carson, Colorado, which was the home of the 104th Infantry Division. I think I established fairly quickly that I was not going to make a good grunt infantryman, so they sent me to Camp Shelby, Mississippi, to the 120th Evacuation Hospital that was just being organized.

MH: Had you had any science background or medical background, or is this just one of those Army things?

WP: I was in the Boy Scouts: first aid and that sort of thing.

MH: So, it was just the luck of the draw that they sent you there.

WP: Well, I think it had something to do with the profile that I presented: it was such that they figured I could be trained to be an orthopedic surgical technician, and that's where I spent some learning sessions, at different hospitals.

MH: You were immediately selected to be an orthopedic surgical technician?

WP: Well, I'm not quite sure when the Army made that decision, but that was my target experience when I went into combat.

MH: What is it that they actually trained you to do in that MOS [Military Occupational Specialty]?

WP: It primarily involved—when I was in England waiting to go overseas, the battle was still in the French area, and I was assigned a hospital in northern England, where we treated mostly, in my particular area, amputations and bone fractures.

MH: When did they finally send the 120th over?

WP: It was in March [1945]. Incidentally, all of this historical stuff is much more correctly and precisely illuminated in my website, under History under the .org, the history, and you can read the official history there.¹ I think it was March. We went into Buchenwald on April 14, 1945, following a trip across France. We stopped for a short period of time in a school in France, waiting for Germans to cross over into their own territory. Then we went to Frankfurt, waiting for a bridge access across the Rhine [River], and then as soon as we got back, we headed off to Weimar.

MH: At that point in the war, what did you know about concentration camps?

WP: Nothing. Nothing, never heard of them. Never heard of them.

MH: Okay. I mean, there was nothing about concentration camps, nothing about the way the Germans were treating prisoners?

WP: No, absolutely nothing.

MH: Okay. So, take me up to just before Buchenwald.

WP: Well, we were bivouacked on April the—I think 12th, or thereabouts—outside of Weimar, maybe two, three miles. The colonel called us together and told us that we had an assignment to go into a camp where we could practice our medical training, and it was a big challenge for us. And that was, you know, pretty much what we thought. My experience as a kid growing up was that camp was a place where you went swimming and you went barefoot and in a bathing suit. You know, I didn't have any idea what a camp of that sort was. So, I had difficulty trying to determine the nature of the camp. I knew there were people needing medical care, but I had no idea what we had to face.

It wasn't until the day before we headed off to Ettersburg—Ettersburg, Schloss Ettersburg, was a summer home in Ettersburg, Germany, at the base of the mountains where the Buchenwald camp was located. That whole area was—it was permeated; that's the term, I guess—by an odor that I had never experienced before, and I later realized, of course, it was the odor of burning bodies and decaying bodies and so forth that wafted down from the mountains and hit the valley below. It was something you couldn't escape.

¹ WP is the webmaster for two sites about Buchenwald and the 120th Evac Hospital, which can be accessed at <http://www.buchenwaldandbeyond.org>.

MH: Does the odor come upon you suddenly, or is it just something that's there and you slowly begin to recognize it?

WP: It's the first thing that you encounter and the last thing you forget. I can tell you from experience that I know I'm not a victim of post-traumatic stress, theoretically—except that, at those times when I am present and there's some burning flesh of some kind, it comes back, and it really does a job. For example, I live in a home where I have a wood stove now. Several years ago, I was stoking the fire in the morning with my bathrobe on. I stoked the fire and didn't realize that, in doing so, a spark came up and lit the backside of my sleeve, went up my arm to the back of my bathrobe and ignited my hair. I smelled that burning flesh, burning human, and it kept me awake for months.

MH: Hmm. When did you write the poem you sent me, "My First Encounter"?

WP: I thought a lot about those experiences, and I figured that that particular moment when I came upon those two or three people was a kind of moment that you never forget. Poetry's been described as the powerful overflow—the overflow of powerful feelings, and it was that powerful feeling that I had that I never expected to see anything like this, and it came upon me, and the behavior was such—so incomprehensible that it remained indelibly in my mind, and I felt the need to address it. I think I did it maybe fifteen or twenty years ago.

MH: Your CO [commanding officer] has this meeting and tells you you're going to go into a camp. At what point, then—how long after that did you actually confront these two or three people?

WP: We left from that camp to Schloss-Ettersburg, where there was a school, and there were rooms for housing some of the men; some stayed outside. I think we were there overnight, and I took it upon myself to take the run up the road. It was about a mile or so through the forest, which I described, to the top of the hill, and there was the double electrified wire fence.

MH: And had the CO prepared you for what you would see, or really said just "a camp"?

WP: No, no. Absolutely not.

MH: I understand what you've written to me, but just tell me what you see. You see this double barbed wire fence.

WP: I went through the gate, and I had seen those two prisoners, so I had some notion that they were somehow related to that facility. And just inside the gate, there was a *platz*, an area where they apparently had been used for some kind of congregation, meeting of prisoners or whatever.

MH: The roll calls?

WP: The roll call. And in the middle of that *platz* was a post, and hanging from the post was a body that was indescribable. It was the commandant of Buchenwald, Herr [Karl Otto] Koch, who had been beaten to death. And I then, in a kind of a stupor—and I have to be quite candid. There are so many things I don't remember about the experience. I can't tell you what I did then. I can tell you episodic moments where I took some pictures; and the pictures are for the most part, those that you see in the website, in the .org section, of the piles of bodies piled up, and the crematorium, and the barracks. The children's barracks was especially painful. I describe that, I think; I think that's in my—

MH: When you came into the camp, you didn't know that the body hanging there was the commandant, did you?

WP: No, except that I could speak German, and I could communicate with some of the prisoners. The prisoners were in all stages of physical—some were fairly healthy. I had met, for example, the Minister of Bridges and Highways from Belgium, who could speak some broken English. He was the one who gave me a boat, the *Santa Maria*, which the prisoners had taken out of the home of Herr Koch and Ilse Koch. That boat now is down in the Holocaust Museum in Washington. But the sails are made of human skin. I gave it to Benjamin Meed at a gathering in 19—I want to say 1984, in Pennsylvania. And he accepted it for the Holocaust Museum.

MH: Did they ever test that to make sure it is—?

WP: Yes, they did. I was told it was human skin, and I got a report back from the museum that it was in fact goat skin. So that—you know, I had spread the word of what I had been told, and I'm telling you what I know now to be the truth.

MH: Because the story of lampshades keeps coming up, although there's—in the newsreel footage that was taken by the Army when they were bringing German citizens to the camp, there's a table set up. They say in the narration that it was tattooed skin; and also shrunken heads, which I had never heard before.

WP: Well, they did have a laboratory, and they did use some medical procedures to make tests for God knows what. I don't know why somebody begins their research in a particular area. Maybe somebody was doing some kind of a study about the condition—the progression of the human body when denied moisture, of which we're 92-93 percent water, anyway. So, I don't know what might've gone on. I have to say, frankly, that until this evidence and proof to establish the fact, then my experience with the boat—and I feel very uncomfortable acknowledging my gullibility—would lead me to say, “Be cautious, and don't accept something until you have proof of it.”

MH: When you went into the camp that first time and saw the commandant's body hanging there, how long did you stay in the camp at that point?

WP: We were there from the 14th to the 19th—wait a minute—14th to the 19th or the 29th. I'm not sure.

MH: But, I mean, that first venture into the camp.

WP: I think I went back—to tell you the truth, I don't remember sleeping, ever, any time, where I slept or how I slept.

MH: Okay. Do you remember going back and talking to the other members of the 120th?

WP: I must have, but I don't remember.

MH: Do you recall walking through the camp?

WP: Oh, yes.

MH: On that very first trip, not later on when you came in with the unit, but on that very first time, what else did you see?

WP: Oh, besides the piles of bodies, a general—and I can't tell you the precise chronology of when I saw what. But some time in that—I think it was a two-week period of time—I saw things. I can't tell you what I saw first or second or third or fourth. I would guess that so much of what I have put into my website is something that I've gleaned from other people in the 120th. There aren't that many left, incidentally, but Milton Silva is a resident down in Swansea, Massachusetts.

MH: Milton Silva?

WP: Yeah.

MH: S-i-l-v-a?

WP: S-i-l-v-a, yes.²

MH: In Swansea?

WP: Yes. He is a retired judge, and was a driver in the motor pool and responsible for transporting—and I'm not sure whether they—I don't think they transported bodies out, but he certainly was responsible for bringing provisions into [the camp].

I know that one of my close friends, Charles Green, now deceased, had an experience bringing C rations into the camp and passing through the gate. He was met by twenty-five or thirty starving prisoners, and they surrounded the truck and he stopped it. They knew he had C rations. So, he went to the back of the truck, opened up a box and started throwing them out, and the prisoners opened them up, tore them open, and started wolfing the C rations down: which were, of course, very high protein, and not to be eaten by somebody who's in an advanced state of dehydration. And every one of those prisoners died. It was like poison for them.

MH: What do you recall about the unit itself moving in? Did you set up inside the camp?

WP: No. As a matter of fact, there was a hospital already operational in the camp with prisoners who were doctors, medical people. What our function was, primarily, was to try

² Milton Silva was also interviewed for the Concentration Camp Liberators Oral History Project. The DOI for his interview is C65-00127.

to somehow keep people alive. There were maybe 50,000 prisoners there. They were dying at the rate of 3,000 a day, and it was a fairly common experience to see a man walking along, though feebly, and then suddenly collapse and fall, and he was gone.

Part of my particular function—duty—was to carry a stethoscope, and as bodies were brought into a barracks and lined up on the floor, it was my task to determine if there were heartbeats. If there was a heartbeat, we sent them on to an aid station; and if there's no heartbeat, we had them assigned to a morgue. So, that was one of the things I did. I don't believe that anybody practiced medicine in the sense that we would think a doctor or nurse or someone would. The nurses, incidentally, were sent away, because the commandant—the colonel of the camp—said the situation was too bad for them.

MH: I was about to ask you that question, because I've interviewed a nurse at Dachau, and then I interviewed another nurse who was in a unit that was to go, I believe, into Buchenwald, and they said the nurses were held back and eventually they went in. When you spend your day listening to the chests of people who are thought to have died, and most of them probably had, how do you get through a day?

WP: (laughs) You do. (laughs) I'm not laughing from humor; I'm laughing from—you know, it's the kind of question. I don't know how I did it. I don't know how anybody did it. You do what you have to do. When you're faced with a situation where you can save people, you save them. You look for heartbeats, and you look for any sign of life. And if you find a sign of life, then that is, in a sense, a measure of hope. And you try always to bring that hope back as fully, as vibrantly as possible.

I had one experience when I went into the children's barracks. There were women in the camp who were—for all intents of purposes, it was a brothel. And there were children born of these prostitutes in the camp. Some were babies, some were very young. They were taken out of the camp almost on the first day, and we had very little to do with them. I was assigned the task of going through the cabin to ascertain that there were no more there, which I did. It was one of those moments that I can describe in some detail and force, because it was so horrifying to walk where those kids, some 400 or 500, were kept. I can't say "housed," because housing suggests a sense of decency and civilization and so forth.

They were, all of them, in a chronic state of diarrhea and diseases of all kinds, and the odor was indescribable. They were not using the toilets, and the bedding, the clothing scattered about; you can imagine what the odor must've been. And I kind of held my nose and walked through, checking as quickly as possible. Went down to the end of the barracks and was about to turn to come back, and I saw a movement in the far corner. I took—I think it was the pole of a broom—and I poked the clothing aside, and there was a

little girl in a fetal position. I grabbed her by the ankle, pulled her out and wrapped her in my jacket, and I started running toward the aid station, because I sensed that there was life there. I heard a kind of a whimper.

I got about halfway to the aid station, and then I felt the little body collapse. She died in my arms. I think that, as much as anything, represented a kind of a turning point in my whole experience with Buchenwald: that here were young people, so affected by the folly of what the elders were doing, and she was the symbolic victim, as young people are so often, of the terrible things that we do as adults. So that, I think, was as powerful a persuasion for me to focus my life on schools and education and young people, as I did.

MH: Does an experience like that cause you to go to your CO and say, “I can’t do this anymore,” or “I need to keep doing this”?

WP: Well, it happened that the time was so brief, and we did see things—we did see good things happening. You can understand that we were the liberators. That expression on the faces of those men that I saw walking up the hill, we saw again and again and again. That softened in so many ways the inhuman conditions that we saw. We saw people appreciative of what we were doing.

And statistically, by the third day we were there—I can’t give you any proof of this, but we were told that the death rate had gone from 3,000 the first day to three the third day. I think that the explanation is not so much that we were working magic medically, but that they suddenly had hope, that they suddenly had some reason for living, and it showed up in their reactions and their relationships. And, of course, we had by that time stabilized their eating conditions so they could feed; and we were aware that the best thing we could do was to feed them whole blood, especially those most severely impacted, that they couldn’t tolerate food in the stomach: they could tolerate whole blood with some nutrients from a healthy person, which we did.

MH: Was there an adequate supply of blood, or were they using you guys as donors?

WP: We had to get blood from everybody we could. I think all of us gave some blood. I don’t know whether that was one of the reasons why—we left Buchenwald because there was a report that Dachau had been liberated, and we needed to get down to southeastern Germany to Cham, where we set up a hospital for the patients at Dachau. And I caught typhus, so I was bedridden with typhus for a couple weeks in the hospital; fortunately we had sulfa drugs by that time, or I wouldn’t be talking to you today.

MH: You caught typhus at Buchenwald?

WP: Yes.

MH: When you're dealing with all the prisoners—the inmates, now liberated—I know there were warnings about rampant disease there. How do you maintain close contact with these people as a medical person with that in the back of your head?

WP: You don't even think of yourself as a medical person. The guy needs to be washed and cleaned. The guy needs to be fed. The guy needs to be—you know, whatever somebody needs, you do. We were not medical people; we were humans. And we tried, as humans should, to bring comfort and succor and support and life and, in doing so, we instilled in them a kind hope that was the best medicine we could bring.

MH: What was the onset of the typhus?

WP: It was like a very heavy cold, and it was diagnosed as soon as I got down to Cham. I was upstairs over the hospital. We were housed in a building where there had been a haberdashery and some other shops, and upstairs there were quarters for living. We took over the whole building, and I was in one of the bedrooms.

MH: You're saying, Cham, C-h-a-m?

WP: Yeah.

MH: Okay. But back to Buchenwald for a moment: how long were you actually in Buchenwald?

WP: From the 14th of April to the 29th, I believe.

MH: And then the order comes to pack up and move.

WP: Pack up and move.

MH: What was your feeling at that point? “Glad to be out of the place,” or, “There’s more we can do”?

WP: We had done what they had wanted us to do. We had brought a certain stabilized living condition there. The prisoners were not dying wholesale, and the medical personnel in the camp, who themselves had been prisoners, were in a position with the medicine we could provide for them to take care of their own. So, there was not the need for the kind of emergency role that we were playing there. We were not actually medical people; we were people who were taking care of people in terrible condition of suffering and near death.

MH: Was there any other interaction with the children before you left?

WP: No. Well, no, until I got to Cham. We encountered a small army of young people, young people ages eight through fourteen or fifteen, too young to be conscripted into the service, and who were sent by their parents from the western part of Germany to the Eastern Front. They got to Cham, which was very near the Czech border where the Russians were holed up, and they holed up in a church in Cham. They were, you know, scavenging for whatever they could, for food and so forth. Because I could speak German, I was assigned the task of managing the distribution of food to them.

I met a young ten-year-old, Arian Ausmann from Stuttgart, who was part of that group, and he became quite attached. He was a constant presence outside my door when I was lying in bed with typhus, and I heard from him when I left the service. I heard from him two or three times a year, every Christmas, for the next thirty years. I think he’s still living near Stuttgart.

MH: What feelings did you have—I realize you’ve just talked to me about dealing with these German children. What feelings did you have at that point about the German people?

WP: Well, you understand, I didn’t have a mindset, as such, about the German people. I had a very strong negative attitude toward human behavior on the part of the citizens of Weimar. General [Dwight D.] Eisenhower and General [George S.] Patton ordered the citizens of Weimar to come to Buchenwald and see what their government had done. I took pictures of them, and I was deeply resentful of their stubborn display of insensitivity. They didn’t show any emotions. I thought that was strange, but I have since reflected on that, and I’m assuming that it was part of a defense mechanism that I don’t want to excuse or counter.

But no, I had been too heavily caught up in the German studies that I had done with German literature, the German romantics. You understand Germany was a nation of—well, states, if you will. The residents of western Germany, the Rhineland, were very much of a kind with the residents of, for example, Holland or Belgium or France. The residents of East Prussia, on the other hand, spoke a very pronounced German with very strict emphasis on the—I would say the guttural, if you will. And in southern Germany, you had the people closer to Austria and Switzerland, who were much more colorful and much more inclined to dance and drink beer and so on and so on. So, you had all different kinds of people. You couldn't categorize them as one of a kind, as you can't in this country.

I also had an awareness that—even at that early age—our country was treating some of its population in terrible ways. There were no black people, for example, in my outfit. Before we came back to this country, we were encamped next to a unit, mechanized unit, which were all Afro-American soldiers. They were held apart from and isolated, completely. It was a condition of inhumanity that was, at least, widely accepted in this period of time. So, I probably never entered into that experience with the kind of indoctrination, if you will, and acculturation of prejudice and bias. And I had too much of the feeling of the German romantics to ascribe to a whole people responsibility for what Adolf Hitler was doing, because I knew there were Germans who were as prejudiced against Adolf Hitler and what he had done, because they were also part of the concentration [camp] humanity also.

MH: I've heard from so many of the people I've interviewed who talk about the experience of bringing German citizens to the camps to help bury bodies, or to even see what was going on, and most of them say that the German people said, "We had no idea this was going on."

WP: They had no idea, that's right.

MH: But they could smell it!

WP: Well, within a certain period, within a certain geographic area. You could smell it within two or three miles, but that was the limitation. I believe that there's no question that that was so. And you have to understand, there were other camps. For example, I don't know what the American citizen—how an American citizen would react now to what we know about Guantanamo. But we know a lot more about Guantanamo than most Germans knew about the camps.

They knew there were work camps; they knew there were camps where prisoners were kept, and these people, because their function in the camp was to provide services, work experiences, that were helpful in waging the war. So, I fully accept the notion that the death camps, such as Auschwitz and—Buchenwald was a work camp. It was not a death camp. It became—because of the stage of the warfare and the inability to provide provisions and food and so forth, it became something quite different. The death camps at Auschwitz were extermination camps.

MH: Were you at Buchenwald when Eisenhower came there?

WP: Yes.

MH: Do you recall that experience?

WP: I recall only—I was aware that he was there. But I recall seeing General Patton. He walked into a building and saw what was inside, and walked out and vomited.

MH: You saw that or you heard about it?

WP: I saw that.

MH: Really? That was surprise, I assume, considering it was Patton.

WP: Well, no, it was not an unexpected or unusual human response to a terribly inhumane scene. He probably didn't have any notion of what a camp was. You know, it was not a pleasant experience.

MH: Right. How long did your recovery from typhus take at Cham?

WP: About two weeks. By May 14 or 15, I think, sometime in late May, we got the word we were leaving Cham, heading back. The word headed that we were going to Camp Polk, which was the holding camp prior to our shipping out to go to Japan, one of the islands in the Pacific.

MH: Was the 120th attached to a particular infantry unit?

WP: We were attached to the 3rd Army.

MH: To the 3rd Army, okay. Did you ever get to Dachau itself?

WP: Yes. Well, I didn't function, because I was largely hospitalized. I saw the entrance to the camp.

MH: But you weren't inside Dachau?

WP: No.

MH: Okay. When did you come back to the States?

WP: Oh, boy. I think it was June of forty-five [1945].

MH: Were you discharged from the Army shortly thereafter?

WP: Well, I went to Camp Polk, and then we had the armistice in Japan. The war was over, and we were beginning the process of reducing the personnel and the programs. I don't know. I don't remember what month. I think it was August when I finally got home.

MH: Do you recall trying to describe what you had seen to your mother or other friends or family?

WP: Well, I did. Did you— I don't know if you've seen the website at all, have you?

MH: Yes, I have.

WP: There is a letter that I wrote my mother in there that would give you some indication of what I told her. She kept the letter and gave it to a newspaper, and it has been circulated several times, the last time being in the *Concord Monitor*. You can pick it up there: concordmonitor.com.

MH: I think it was the article in the *Concord Monitor* where I found your name, initially; that's how I came across you. So, you come back, you're out of the service. Now what happens to you?

WP: Back to BU [with] the GI Bill of Rights: six years of college, two years of graduate school. In 1952, I was accepted in Washington for an appointment to the Department of Labor to bring the Marshall Plan; it was operational then. We were going to try to indoctrinate German businessmen about how they could recover by visiting sites around the United States, and it was going to be my task to show them around. Then my sponsor died, and I lost my political appointment, my clout, and I had to go back to—I had to go into something, so I went into teaching.

MH: Was teaching something you had thought about?

WP: Well, I had always thought that it would be fun to teach, and I think it was part of my being that I was very satisfied with the experiences I had. I had success in working with young people, and so I stuck with it until I was sixty-three.

MH: When did you first begin to tell students about your experiences in the war, particularly Buchenwald?

WP: (laughs) That's really funny. It isn't funny; it's unusual. I didn't say a word about my wartime experiences for years and years and years. Then I went to Washington for the opening of the Holocaust Museum. Parents of students, Sarah and Jim Feldman—Jim was a professor at Northeastern—took me down as their guest, and I participated in the ceremonies, and made contact with Meed and told him about my wartime experiences, and then went to Philadelphia the next year to give him the boat. And then, I learned of the development of a program in Brookline, Massachusetts, next to Newton, Facing History and Ourselves. You may have heard about it.

MH: I believe I read about it.

WP: Well, it was unique in that Margaret Strom and—oh, who's the fellow with her? I can't remember now—decided that she wanted to formalize a curriculum in teaching the Holocaust in Brookline. I came upon it and said, "Let's piggyback and get something going in Newton." So, I brought the program into Newton and started teaching it. I wanted to make it a part of the high school curriculum and was prepared to give up

teaching English and social studies to affect that development. The principal of the school where I was teaching didn't like the idea, so I resigned from teaching in a huff, and I went off and I started doing workshops myself around in schools.

MH: How were they received?

WP: What?

MH: How were those workshops received?

WP: Very well. I did thirty-five or forty a year. I developed the website because the age of the computer and Internet were coming on fast, and I could give kids materials. I made some contacts with the Keene State College, where they have a Holocaust center now. For the most part, it was by word of mouth, although I did get some assistance from some people in some colleges. I did some programs at MIT and Boston University. Elie Wiesel, who was a sixteen-year-old at Buchenwald when we went in there—and he, of course, has been quite prominent in writing about the Holocaust.

MH: I was going to ask you something, probably incredibly brilliant, that just completely slipped my mind.

WP: I know how you feel.

MH: (laughs)

WP: This is not the last time you may be calling.

MH: I'm sure of that. I—I'm embarrassed.

WP: Don't be. I threw a lot of stuff at you.

MH: Yes. Well, completely in a different direction, in talking with veterans who were at the various camps—I don't know if you've run across it. But, for example, the 42nd [Infantry] Division is still at war with the 45th [Infantry] Division over who liberated

Dachau. And the more I've thought about it as I've begun to work on writing this book, the more it bothers me that certain units were labeled "liberators."

WP: Well, let me see if I can't illuminate a little of this.

MH: Okay.

WP: Excuse me just a minute.

MH: Sure.

WP: I had to scratch my ear. That phone has been on my left ear for so long.

We—in fact, when people talk about “liberating” Buchenwald, we didn't liberate Buchenwald. The prisoners of Buchenwald liberated themselves. The guards who were responsible for maintaining the conditions in the camp had heard about the decline of the German army and the chaos that was there, and the fact that no one was bringing food and comfort, and there was nothing really that you could say was a reflection of the majesty of the Third Reich visible. The only thing they had visible were fifteen- and sixteen-year-old boys in uniforms who preferred not to be there. So, by the time we got to Buchenwald, the prisoners already had freed themselves, the guards had run off into the woods, and there was no manifestation at all of any army structure visible. And I suspect the same would've happened at Dachau, because you could almost hear the Russian artillery across the Czech border from Dachau, and Dachau was liberated two weeks after Buchenwald.

MH: For most of the camps, the guards had fled. I mean, there was some—

WP: They fled, sure.

MH: There was some gunfire at Dachau. But I'm even taking it back to the point where the dead GI lying in the surf at Omaha Beach is as much a liberator as the man who went through the gates at Buchenwald.

WP: Well, sure. We were there, and we did a job on the German infrastructure, the army and social conditions and so forth, and Germany was pretty well shot. You know, we

blew up trains and so forth; there was just no effort being made to feed and provide comfort and other necessities for people in these camps, so they tried as best they could to keep themselves going. You know, it's a little bit—it's comical, almost, to say, "Oh, we were the first to rescue these or liberate these camps." I've been called a "liberator," but I say over and over again, "I didn't liberate anything. The only thing I did was try to liberate them from death and demise by restoring them with life and hope. But in the sense of the structure of the camp, (laughs) that had happened two or three days before we arrived there. Witness those people outside the fence.

MH: I need to go back over your website again, but is there a photo of you at Buchenwald?

WP: Uh—I'm not sure. There's a picture of me in the biography section. I was at the age—it was taken when I was, I think, in New York, just before we embarked on the *Queen Elizabeth*.

MH: That's the formal photo?

WP: Yeah.

MH: In your Class A's [uniform]. But, as far as you know, do you have any picture of yourself in Europe?

WP: I don't think so. I'll look again, but being the one that took the pictures, I wasn't going to take a picture of myself.

MH: Okay. As I said, I want to go through the website again; there may be a couple of photos I'd like permission to use.

WP: Sure.

MH: And I also—has the poem you sent me, "My First Encounter," been published?

WP: No.

MH: Would it be possible to use part of it?

WP: Sure.

MH: Okay. I'm still in the research stage. I won't actually be—the manuscript's due next May, so it's going to be a while before I know exactly.

WP: There've been a number of people; I don't know if you're familiar. I think you're the fourth or fifth person who's been attempting something of this nature. The last one was Susie Davidson of Boston, who wrote a book, *I Refused to Die*. She's got a bit of stuff about me in that.

MH: The book is called *I Refused to Die*?

WP: Yeah.

MH: Okay. All right. Well, I—

WP: There's some other stuff from newspapers: there's an article that John Marcus did in the Boston newspaper. Take a look at it. Do a little digging.

MH: Okay. You sent me the Emerson quote about how one evaluates his life on earth.

WP: Well, I did that because of the profound effect of Goethe's philosophy that he developed; it's so simple and yet so profound. It took him a lifetime to write the play *Faust*, but he ended the play with his philosophy of three words, that feeling is everything. Feeling is everything. You can't get closer to the basic substance of what makes a human being a human being than his feeling for another human being.

I have been touched and moved repeatedly by my experience in dealing with those situations where inhuman behavior results in sub-human conditions for humanity. You look at history, and you see it with the Indians: there's no good Indian but a dead Indian. And, you know, there's been books written. There's a great book written by three psychoanalysts called *A General Theory of Love*, which picks up on this thought, and they explain so that you could understand very readily. As a military man yourself, your training was to defeat an enemy that was a threat to you and your buddies. And they were

not humans, they were sub-humans. They were the Huns, they were the bosch, they were the Nazis: they were this-or-that, but they weren't on a par with you or your buddies.

MH: It's hard to train people to kill people if they think they're on a par with themselves.

WP: Absolutely. So, it's an experience that I've had as a kind of a lifetime, that I think if you look at the quotation of Emerson, everything that he says in there will reflect somehow back again to that "feeling is everything." "*Gefühl ist alles.*" So, I chose that because I want it to be my legacy: that I did as much as I could to advance that thought and principle. That feeling has been the most important human reaction that I have been engaged in all my life.

MH: You have children of your own?

WP: No, I have hundreds and hundreds of hundreds of children I've worked with in classes for thirty-five years. And I still see some of them.

MH: Were you married?

WP: No.

MH: No? Okay. All right. Well, I hope I can call you back when I'm a little bit further down. I appreciate your time and what you did. Thank you very much, sir.

WP: Yeah. Well, if you need anything else, let me know.

MH: Okay.

WP: Thank you.

MH: I'll do that. Bye-bye.

Part 1 ends; part 2 begins

MH: All right.

WP: As far as the pictures are concerned, you have access to the website. In the .org section, which is the area where I have the various events and history and that sort of thing, under the Media there are some articles in which there are some pictures. In the Camp Organization, there's a picture of me in my bio. I don't know that I can do much better than that.

MH: Okay. You don't have a hard copy of it?

WP: No.

MH: Oh, okay. Okay.

WP: You happen to be the sixth person who's inquired about some of the details in the process of writing a book. I don't have many of them. I know that a week from Monday, I'm supposed to go to Concord to see the book opening of *They Went to War*, which is the story of the New Hampshire residents who were in World War II. I don't think I'm going to be able to go down to that, because I have difficulty driving.

MH: Ah. Okay. All right. But—

WP: You're at the bottom of the barrel now.

MH: (laughs)

WP: Six of us—I've got six dying every day from the 120th, from the World War II veterans group.

MH: Yeah. At this point, I've interviewed somewhere above 150 men and four women, involved with various camps.

WP: Yeah. You're focusing on the liberators, is that right?

MH: I'm focusing on the liberators, but primarily as witnesses to what they saw. I mean, people try and draw me into an argument over who liberated what first, and I said, "It's sixty-three years later. That's no longer of any interest."

WP: Yeah. Well, actually, we were not liberators in the technical sense. The camp liberated themselves. When we arrived, we followed a motorized division in; they stayed there for a day or so. They were there on the 9th, and we came on the 11th.

MH: Right. I'm going to make the point in the introduction to the book that if you want to talk about liberators, you really have to talk about every American who set foot on European soil.

WP: True.

MH: Virtually almost none of the camps required a running gun battle to liberate them. In nearly every case—there's some minor exceptions—the SS guards had left. If a unit really had to fight their way in, I could see them defending them being called liberators. But as I said to somebody from the 42nd Division, who's still fighting the war with the 45th Division over who really liberated Dachau, I said, "I don't understand how you can call yourself any more of a liberator than the guys who were dead in the surf at Omaha Beach."

WP: Precisely. You know, I think it's a gross extension of credibility to say we liberated something, when we didn't.

MH: Right. Except, it is—it's a good word.

WP: Yeah, well— (laughs) It's been misused frequently.

MH: And I probably will misuse it on the cover, but I'll redefine it inside.

WP: (laughs) Very good.

MH: I mean, my purpose really was to get—you guys are witnesses, and you're the last American witnesses left alive. And, truth be told, that's really the purpose of the book. It's to let you tell the story one—

WP: Especially in light of what's going on in the Mideast and up there about the whole fact of genocide. I think the story must be told. And you'd be interested to know that some of the material that I had on my little website was used in a trial in England, with a professor—

MH: The professor from Georgia? Deborah Lipstadt?

WP: Yeah.

MH: Yeah.

WP: She acknowledged that my witness accounts were some of the best evidence. It's a good feeling.

MH: Yes. Well, I've actually just written about your memory of when your bathrobe got set on fire—

WP: Oh, really?

MH: —and the smell of the burning flesh.

WP: Well, I tell you, my whole life has been—I spoke at a gathering of the leadership of the New England National Guard last year, who were concerned about the alarming number of veterans from Iraq coming back with PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder]. The fact that so many of us absorbed ourselves and (inaudible) that kept us in touch with people in a way that we could give of ourselves and, in giving of ourselves, we strengthened our sense of humanity. So, the bathrobe fire incident was not nearly as critical an issue in my life as it might have been, had I not been in the classroom for thirty-five years. You know, war is hell, no matter how you talk about it. Any time you have to deal with it in any age, it's not something pleasant to deal with.

But anyway, I appreciate your efforts, and anything I can do to help or assist you—

MH: If I have more questions, I will get in touch with you.

WP: You're very good.

MH: Thank you very much, Warren. I sure appreciate it.

WP: You're very welcome. Bye.

MH: That was Warren Priest from the 120th Evac Hospital on November 29 at 8:25 PM.

End of interview