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Robert Ray oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, July 18, 2008

Robert Ray (Interviewee)

Michael Hirsh (Interviewer)

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[Transcriber's note: The Interviewee's personal information has been removed, at the request of the Interviewer. This omission is indicated with ellipses.]

Robert Ray: I've got a short history written out on all this stuff, but you'll probably be disappointed. You want dates?

Michael Hirsh: I don't need dates; I can figure out dates usually.

RR: Oh I see.

MH: Before we start, your name is Robert Ray, R-a-y?

RR: That's right.

MH: And your address, please.

RR: ...

MH: And your home phone is....

RR: That's right.

MH: And your date of birth.

RR: August 12, 1920.

MH: And what unit were you in the Army?

RR: I was with the 3rd Armored Division.

MH: And you got to Nordhausen?

RR: Well, actually, I was in the 36th Armored Infantry Regiment. That was in the 3rd Armored Division, and I was in camps all over this country before I went overseas.

MH: Well, let me start at the beginning. Where did you grow up?

RR: Right here in Nashville.

MH: In Nashville. What were you doing before you went in the Army?

RR: I was a newspaper photographer.

MH: Really?

RR: For the *Nashville Banner*; that used to be an afternoon paper here, but they folded.

MH: And had you been to high school and college?

RR: Just high school.

MH: Did you enlist or were you drafted?

RR: I enlisted.

MH: In what year?

RR: In 1941.

MH: Forty-one [1941]. Right after Pearl Harbor?

RR: Yes, right after Pearl Harbor.

MH: I'm curious: I've talked to a number of guys who enlisted then, as did many Americans, but what went into your decision? Did you discuss it with parents? What did you do?

RR: Well, I just felt like it was something I had to do. Everybody else was doing it. So, I joined. I just joined up and enlisted.

MH: Where'd the Army send you?

RR: Well, let's see. To start out with, I went to Camp Grant, Illinois, and then I went to Camp Crowder, Missouri. And Fort Eustis, Virginia—that was a big anti-aircraft camp—and then I went to a camp down at Stuart, Florida [Camp Murphy]. It was a radar [training school]; radar was real secret stuff at that time and if it hadn't been for the Battle of the Bulge, I probably never would've gone overseas, but they needed infantry replacements. So, I was just automatically put in the infantry, and went from there to Camp Gordon, Georgia, for a brief infantry training, then went home for about a week or so, and then I shipped out overseas.

MH: When did you ship out? This would have been forty-four [1944]?

RR: It was about—it was around forty-four [1944]?

MH: Where'd you go? You were going over as a replacement, or were you already with —?

RR: Yes, I was going over as a replacement, infantry replacement, and of course, back then we all went by ship, you know overseas. Landed in England and went down through England on a train. And crossed over the English Channel by boat, of course, and then we unloaded at Le Havre, which was in France. And then from there we went across Belgium and France and Holland and went on into Germany.

MH: When did you hook up with the 3rd Armored Division?

RR: Well, when I reached Cologne, Germany, I was met by an old sergeant that had been wounded four or five times, and he told us what divisions we was gonna be in, and at that time, the 3rd Armored was at Cologne, Germany. And we crossed over the Rhine River there by pontoon boats, and then from then on, it was—every man was for himself.

MH: What was your rank at the time?

RR: I was a T-5, which is the same as a corporal.

MH: How'd you feel about being assigned to an armored unit?

RR: Well, I didn't really know what it was. I later found out that being in an armored infantry, you never had to do no walking. You just had to ride on the back of a Sherman tank all the time, and we had a massive roundup of the division. They used to call it "jumping off," and then from there we went from town to town, and—

MH: What was the first combat you were in?

RR: Well, it was all the way across Germany, of course, and the 3rd Armored was—their nickname was the Spearhead Division, and of course we're always far beyond the enemy lines, and the foot infantry would come in behind us and round up the pockets that we formed. And I don't know the exact date, but we had a breakthrough. We were at this place where everybody thought the war was over; we'd made fifty-some-odd mile that day, longest drive in history. And all of a sudden, a big old German Tiger tank come rollin' out, cut loose and hit the tank I was riding on, and of course, we just jumped and scattered and run like the devil, and we was lost from our division. After several days,

just eating what we could find, we finally met back up with the 3rd Armored, and of course, they was all glad to see us.

MH: How many guys were with you that leaped off the tank and disappeared for a while?

RR: I don't have any idea. The full squad was about twelve, but you never did have—you were always short two or three men, wounded or killed.

MH: How many guys could ride on the outside of a tank?

RR: Well, a squad, which was normally about twelve men, but never did have that many. It was pretty doggone tight, had to hold each other on. And the tanks, they had four big old Cadillac engines in them, and them son of a guns was—it burned you up. You couldn't hardly stand to sit down on the darned thing because it was so hot. But some of the boys would actually go to sleep and sleep; somebody would hold them on and keep them from falling off.

MH: You got pretty much blown off the tank and had to fend for yourself for a while.

RR: Yeah, that's right.

MH: When you linked up with your unit again, did you know where you were?

RR: Well, we just knew that they knew where we were, so that's all that mattered. And this Nordhausen thing—when we reached Nordhausen, we didn't know anything about this Holocaust, had no idea about it. And we reached this prison of war camp, and one of the tanks just busted a big hole in the wall of this camp, brick, concrete wall or something. And all them poor devils come screaming out there, some of them so doggone thin from malnutrition; we gave them all the rations we had, and cigarettes. They'd eat cigarettes just like they're candy.

MH: Was this a camp with barbed wire or the big prison or—?

RR: It was a big, enclosed prison.

MH: When you saw the prison, you couldn't see into it, right?

RR: No.

MH: So, the tank just drives through the wall?

RR: Just knocked a big hole in it so they could come out.

MH: But you didn't know what was on the other side of the wall.

RR: We had no idea. Didn't have no idea, but we saw flatcars on the side track there that was loaded with bodies: some of them you could see they'd move a foot or a leg once in a while, have a little life in them. Those people [who] lived around there, they claimed they didn't know anything about it, but that was a bunch of nonsense, because they could smell it, as far as that's concerned.

MH: Were the flatcars inside the wall or outside?

RR: No, that was outside on a sidetrack rail.

MH: Was that the first thing you saw, or the prison was the first thing?

RR: The prison—well, it was all there together.

MH: How many—these are flatcars or cattle cars or boxcars?

RR: Well, they were just old flatcars like you'd haul timber on, you know.

MH: They were just loaded with bodies?

RR: Yeah, just loaded. That was about the end of my Holocaust experience.

MH: When you saw the railroad cars, were you able to get off the tanks and go over and do anything?

RR: No, we just—the division decided to keep on rolling, and like I said, we gave them all the rations we had, and we just left them behind. I have no idea what happened to them.

MH: There were no German guards there at the time, were there?

RR: Oh, there were.

MH: They were still there?

RR: They were there, but most of them run like scalded dogs.

MH: Was there any shooting going on?

RR: Oh, yeah, yeah.

MH: So, I'm just trying to get the sequence. So, the tank busts through the wall, and you see the inmates of the place. Do you see guards inside as well?

RR: Yeah, they were—of course, they were outside and inside, too, but they saw that they didn't have a chance against a tank outfit, so they just run like rabbits.

MH: Did you track down any of them and get them—

RR: No, we just kept on rolling. Went on to a little river called the Mulde River.

MH: That's M-u-l-d-e?

RR: I think it was spelled M-u-l.

MH: Okay.

RR: And we got—we could hear the Russians coming, and we was afraid they'd mistake us for Germans, and so we decided to set there for a few days. And we lost several men right there at the river, and that's when my staff sergeant was killed, my squad leader and that's when I took his place. They made me staff sergeant.

MH: There were Germans that were running from the Russians that you got into fights with?

RR: Well, they were just in between, and we'd take turns about looking up over the bank of that river so them jokers wouldn't be slipping up on us. I had a good friend that—his name was MacDuff, we called him "Mac," and we took turns about peeping over this bank, and he raised up his head once in a while, and I'd look over there once in awhile, fire a few rounds. But he raised up one time and one of them bullets got him right in the top of the head, just blew the whole top of his head off.

MH: Oh, man. So, that was German snipers?

RR: Yeah, that was when the war ended for us. We decided to pull us back for about fifty miles and let the Russians take care of things. And that was the end of the war for us. The war didn't end but a little bit of time later on, but that was just about the end of the whole thing.

MH: How many days after Nordhausen was that?

RR: I have no idea.

MH: Nordhausen was April 11, and the war didn't end until May 7 or 8.

RR: Yeah, and some time right along through there, I know Franklin Roosevelt died.

MH: He died the day after you liberated Nordhausen, on the twelfth—actually, he died on the thirteenth, in Germany.

RR: We didn't hear about his death until later on. Didn't have no way of communicating. I saw old boys cry when they heard he had died, because everybody was crazy about him.

MH: I was going to ask you what the impact was when you heard the president had died.

RR: Well, it was pretty big impact, because most people were really crazy about him. And then, of course, when he died and Harry Truman took his place, he decided to drop the A-bomb and that saved a bunch of lives, because we were scheduled—our division was scheduled to go to Japan. So, he done us a big favor by dropping that bomb.

MH: Can I take you back to Nordhausen for a couple minutes? Do you remember what the weather was like that day? I know that's a really strange question to ask.

RR: I don't remember. I know the day we heard that Roosevelt was dead, a lot of the peach trees or cherry trees or something were in bloom, and I can remember that part of it. So, it was in the springtime of the year.

MH: When you punched a hole in the wall and saw these people coming toward you, what did you think? Because you told me that you hadn't been told anything about the Holocaust.

RR: Well, we still didn't know—we just thought they were what they used to call DPs, displaced persons from all over the country and mostly from France. We didn't know anything about no Holocaust.

MH: But you could tell these people had been starved.

RR: Oh, yeah, they just been literally starved to death.

MH: What's the conversation like among the guys you're with?

RR: Well, I don't remember too much about it. After they saw that, they felt like they had a good reason to be fighting the war, so—

MH: Were there lots of bodies stacked up in that camp?

RR: Yeah, well, I don't know about inside. None of us never did go inside that place, but on them flatcars, there was.

MH: Did you have any interaction with the German citizens who lived around there?

RR: Nothing, except they would—G-2, what was called intelligence officers at that time, would question some of them and they said they didn't know anything about it. Of course, that was just a big lie. They'd bound to know something about it.

MH: There were a number of smaller camps around there. Nordhausen was the big camp, and there was a camp called Dora where they were building rockets underground.

RR: Yeah.

MH: Did you get anywhere near Dora?

RR: I don't remember whether we did or not. We knew they were building some kind of a secret weapon, and at times—later on, we could hear them things go over. They sounded like an old T-model Ford. They had a sorry engine in them, but what they'd do, they'd fire one of them things and they had just enough fuel in them to get to England, and then they'd run out of fuel and drop. Of course, they had a heck of a explosion in them and done a lot of damage to England and London.

MH: They were firing these in the area that you guys were in?

RR: I don't know where the thing was coming from, but a lot of times, we could hear them coming over at night.

MH: Were you concerned that that stuff was going to drop on you?

RR: We didn't know what they were.

MH: None of the officers told you what it was or they didn't know, either?

RR: No, they didn't know either.

MH: When did you finally get back to the States?

RR: Well, I stayed over there. They had a thing called a points system. You had to have so many points before you could come home, and the time I spent in the reserve before I went into active service, at that time it didn't count, so I had a low point count. So, I stayed over there for maybe a year in the Army of Occupation and just went from town to town. We'd go into a little old country town and run all the civilians out, and we'd take over their houses and lived in them. Had pretty good food.

Then one day, the 2nd Armored Division found out through records that I'd had some experience in photography, and they called my commanding officer and had me sent to the 2nd Armored Division headquarters. I was assigned as the division photographer, so I got to do a lot of traveling and went back into France, and I had an assignment to make pictures of all the 3rd Armored Division graves that were in France, and they were gonna send each one of these pictures back home to their families. It was quite an interesting job.

MH: When you were with the 3rd Armored Division in combat, did you shoot pictures?

RR: No.

MH: So, you didn't have a camera with you?

RR: No, I was just an old rifleman and had an M1 rifle.

MH: But you didn't carry your own personal camera.

RR: No, no.

MH: Do you have any pictures of you overseas?

RR: Well, I have maybe some, you know, after the war was over. We didn't have time to make no pictures during the war. I wish they had picked somebody there. The 3rd Armored had a convention here in Nashville a few years ago and I went to it. Didn't see a soul I knew, and it was kind of disappointing, but I didn't—there was twelve of us that joined the company as replacements, and when the war ended, there were only three of us left. And I'd sure like to see those three guys, but there's no way in the world. I guess most of them are dead by now.

MH: Yeah. You have a picture of yourself from after the war, from when you were still over there in uniform?

RR: I'm sure there's something around here.

MH: I would just like to get a picture of you from back then and one from now to be able to use in the book.

RR: Well, I'll see if I can't dig up one. Let's see, I don't have a computer, so I can't email it. I'd have to send it in the—

MH: If you can dig one up and you can send it, I'll scan it and send it back to you.

RR: Well, that's okay. I'll have to have a mailing address.

MH: Okay, you know what I'll do is I'll send you an envelope—

RR: Okay.

MH: And just so I have it....

RR: That's right.

MH: Okay, I'll send you an envelope and—

RR: Yeah, I might dig up three or four pictures.

MH: Okay, and if you have a current one, that'd be good, too, so we can see what you look like now.

RR: You wouldn't want to see what I look like now.

MH: Hey, we're all getting there. I'm a little younger than you. The interesting, this—when you told me they made you a photographer, I was a combat correspondent for the 25th [Infantry] Division in Vietnam.

RR: Oh, you were?

MH: So, I dragged a camera and an audiotape recorder, you know, all over the central part of Vietnam, for a year, for 1966. I was lucky because I had been a journalist before I went in, so they said, "Okay, you can still be one." But I thank you very, very much for your time. What'd you do when you came back to the U.S.?

RR: Well, I come back and a job was kind of hard to find and the country was just coming out of, more or less, a depression, and times was kind of hard. I worked for a hardware concern for a while, and then I went to work as a bookkeeper for a wholesale company, wholesaled Zenith, Philco radios. Wasn't no television sets back then. You stirred up all this stuff now, I don't know if I can take my afternoon nap or not.

MH: I'm sorry, sir.

RR: (laughs)

MH: You got married?

RR: Well, I was married before that.

MH: Oh, you were married before you went into the Army?

RR: I was married in November of 1941, Christmas Day [*sic*].

MH: So, you've been married sixty-seven years.

RR: Sixty-seven years.

MH: Man, long time. You have children?

RR: One daughter.

MH: One daughter.

RR: I tell everybody we were married in November, and Pearl Harbor was December 7, and we had a short honeymoon.

MH: (both laugh) Must be. Thank you very much, and I'll send you that envelope, and if you can find some photos that'd be great.

RR: Okay, I appreciate you calling.

MH: Take care, sir.

RR: Okay, bye-bye.

MH: Bye-bye.

End of interview