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## John W. Rheney Jr. oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, June 30, 2008

John W. Rheney (Interviewee)

Michael Hirsh (Interviewer)

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

**Michael Hirsh:** First of all, your name is John W. R-h-e-n-e-y, Jr.

**John Rheney:** Correct.

MH: And your date of birth is what, sir?

JR: 7-20-23 [July 20, 1923].

MH: You sent me a note that said you were at Nordhausen.

JR: That's correct.

MH: Wherever you'd like to start, tell me how you came to be there.

JR: Well, I'm not sure. I don't remember whether—I might tell you this before you turn that on. I'm not sure because I don't remember whether certain people were selected from each company to go over there and see this by General [Terry de la Mesa] Allen, or

whether the whole company went over there. I just don't recall. I think it was probably a few people were selected from various parts of the division to go over there.

MH: What division were you in?

JR: The 104<sup>th</sup> Infantry, which was known as the Timberwolves.

MH: And were you a doctor at the time?

JR: Oh, no, no, no. I'd completed two years of college and then the reserve was called up, and I became a doctor after I got out of the army.

MH: So what was your rank at the time?

JR: Staff sergeant.

MH: And you were what, a rifleman?

JR: Yeah, I was a rifle squad leader, yes.

MH: So, the word went out for people to go see this camp?

JR: No, when one of our regiments—I think it was not the 413<sup>th</sup>, which I was on. The 414<sup>th</sup> came across and liberated that, in our advance toward Berlin, which we never got to. But and then I think the general wanted everybody to see this, and then General [Dwight D.] Eisenhower said, "Take pictures, because they're going to say it didn't exist fifty years from now." And I think he wanted people to see it, to assure future generations that this sort of thing did occur.

MH: So, tell me about the day that you went there.

JR: Well, they trucked us over there right to the gates, and the guards were already gone by then. They'd gone off whenever the regiment that liberated the thing got there. And it

didn't look too bad from the outside, but when you got inside there were just stacks and stacks of corpses. All of them had apparently starved to death.

MH: You could tell by looking at them.

JR: Oh, they were nothing but skin and bones. Now, there were a few people up that I remember, and they greeted us like we've never been greeted before; but most of them, I think, were French, if I'm not mistaken. I did not speak French so I didn't understand them, but some of the people that were with us did. And there were some people alive, but there were just rooms and buildings stacked with corpses: these people had starved to death.

MH: So, corpses were inside and outside.

JR: Inside and outside, right, some right where they'd fallen and some had been obviously moved and stacked by the guards before we got there.

MH: When you say they greeted you like you've never been greeted, can you describe that for me?

JR: Oh, those people, they were in rags and starved—they, too, were starved, I guess, but for some reason they had survived a little bit. But they threw their arms around us and I dunno, they just greeted us like we had saved 'em, which I guess we had.

MH: And so the communication was all physical, you couldn't understand them?

JR: Some of the people—some of our members talked French and other languages, too, and they could communicate with them. I just couldn't.

MH: So, what did you do in the camp, how long did you stay in there, and what did you do?

JR: Oh, we weren't in there but part of a day. I personally wasn't there but part of a day, but they—somebody sent, I guess, I don't know as part of our division or not, but sent troops in there and forced the people in the nearby town to come out and dig mass graves

and bury most of these people. The ones that were alive, the medics took care of them. And some of them survived.

MH: Were you there when the mass graves were being dug?

JR: No. I just read about that.

MH: So, what else did you see on that day? I mean, how many living people do you think you saw?

JR: Oh, I don't know. Not a great deal, I'd say less than fifty. But that doesn't mean there weren't others, because I did not—I went fairly deep into the camp. I did not go into the cave, where the V-bombs were being built.

MH: So, the camp you were in was probably Dora, which was part of Nordhausen.

JR: Yes, that's correct.

MH: That's where they were building the V-bombs.

JR: That's right.

MH: What did the buildings in the camp look like?

JR: Oh, they were—some of them were just framed buildings with places for these people, stacked up; they were open to the outside. I did not go into any buildings that were offices or anything like that.

MH: What about—did you see any places where they put people to death, or where they burned people?

JR: No. I understand they was there, but I did not see any of that.

MH: What—how old were you when you were going through that?

JR: Let's see, that was 1943—

MH: That would have been forty-five [1945]—

JR: Forty-five [1945], so I was twenty-two.

MH: What's that do to a twenty-two year old, to see that sort of thing?

JR: (laughs) I tell you, it shakes you. It really does. And I've never seen like that, of course, and I hope never to see it again. But it shook everybody.

MH: Do you remember talking about it with your fellow soldiers afterwards?

JR: No, 'cause some of 'em were along with us; we talked about it among ourselves about it.

MH: That's what I mean.

JR: Yes. We just talked about it and could not understand how human beings could treat other human beings like that.

MH: I mean, war is brutal in itself. But even in the midst of a war, this was above and beyond?

JR: Oh, it was. Of course, I'd read about the Civil War and the slaughter that took place there, but at least they—and the camps that they had, Camp Anderson and—but I had never seen those, and even those were not like this was.

MH: You mean Andersonville<sup>1</sup>?

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<sup>1</sup> Andersonville Prison, or Camp Sumter, in Georgia, was a Confederate POW camp during the American Civil War. This camp was particularly cruel to the soldiers housed there, and instances of starving, malnutrition and disease were reported en masse.

JR: Yeah.

MH: Yeah. So how do you reconcile it, I mean—let me ask you, are you or were you a religious person?

JR: Well, I am. I don't think I'm over-religious, but I am. I just didn't connect this with religion somehow. I just—I blamed this on human beings, not—all religions were brutalized by the Nazis and by Hitler, and it wasn't a religious thing. Except, of course, the Jewish were singled out; but there were all religions in these camps.

MH: What about after you got home—did the memories of this come back to you?

JR: No. I mean, I remember it, but I didn't have nightmares about it or anything like that.

MH: Did you ever meet any of the people who survived the camps?

JR: No. I say no—I never personally, but the 104<sup>th</sup> Division has had a reunion every year from 1945 to the present, and they have had survivors of the camp and descendents of survivors at these meetings. Incidentally, they're having one in Washington this fall, and they're having one in Portland, Oregon, next year and that will be the last one.

MH: So, they have two more reunions to go. Have you gone to the reunions?

JR: I've been to the last fifteen of them, yes.

MH: The last fifteen of them. I'm curious, what is it that makes you go to the reunions? What pulls you?

JR: Oh, I knew—you knew people closely who were in your platoon, and less closely in the other platoons of the company, but it's just seeing those people who—well I guess they were your best friends at the time, and they guarded your back, and you guarded theirs.

MH: And when you see them at the reunion?

JR: We have what we—the different organizations, platoons and companies, have tables, and most of the people that are in given tables and given companies sit around them. They'll tell some war stories, but not many. They just sit around and talk: what have you done and how many children do you have and how many grandchildren do you have. We don't talk about the war very much.

MH: How many children or grandchildren do you have?

JR: I have four children and eight grandchildren.

MH: Was there a point at which you told them about the war?

JR: No. They have never really asked me about it. I don't mind talking about it; I've heard that a lot of people don't want to talk about it, but I guess you remember if there were some funny parts or some interesting parts, you don't talk about the slaughter that went on.

MH: What was your first combat action?

JR: In Holland. We landed directly in—we didn't go through England, we landed directly on the French coast, on the beaches. And then we were attached to the Canadian 1<sup>st</sup> Army in Holland and helped to free the port of Antwerp.

MH: And that was so the allies could bring supplies into Antwerp.

JR: That's right.

MH: Did you see any other camps?

JR: No.

MH: Nothing, okay. And did anyone tell you about these places before you got there?

JR: Of course, I'd read about 'em—I think it was general knowledge that there were camps that people were ill-treated in. But we had a picture that they showed recruits when you first went in the army, what we fight for, and these camps were mentioned in that.

MH: Oh, those were the *Why We Fight* movies?

JR: Yes.

MH: So, your guys did know a bit about them. But—

JR: We knew they were there, but we hadn't seen 'em. And we couldn't imagine—we couldn't have imagined what was going on in those camps.

MH: I've talked to some people who've said that even if they had been told about it, there's no way to prepare you for what you were going to see.

JR: That is absolutely correct.

MH: You came back and went to medical school where?

JR: Yes, I'd had two years at Clemson University and I went back and finished there and went to Medical University in South Carolina in Charleston.

MH: And became what kind of a doctor?

JR: I was a pediatrician.

MH: I'm just curious what led to that choice.

JR: (laughs) What led to that choice was I supposed to go into family practice with one of my best friends, and while I was—he was a year ahead of me—and he wrote me a letter

and said, “You can have it; I’m going into ophthalmology.” So I had to look around. And I’d always been interested in pediatrics, so—I applied in Birmingham and Charleston and I was accepted at both, and I knew Charleston, so I went there.

MH: How long did you practice medicine?

JR: Oh, close to forty years.

MH: So how old were you when you retired?

JR: Oh, let’s see—I’d have to sit down and figure that up. I haven’t really retired. I work at Fort Jackson now in what they call MEPS [Military Entrance Processing Station], M-E-P-S; it’s where the recruits are received and we’re the first one to see ’em. We do physicals on them. And I started out with two days a week and now I’m up to five.

MH: I have a couple doctors at the VA who are in their early eighties.

JR: Is that right?

MH: Yes, sir.

JR: Well, I’m eighty-five. I will be eighty-five next month.

MH: Well, I thank you very much for your service and for your time, sir.

JR: If I can help you any more, call back.

MH: I sure will. Thank you very much.

JR: Thank you.

MH: Okay, bye-bye.

*End of interview*