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James Rose oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, September 5, 2008

James Rose (Interviewee)

Michael Hirsh (Interviewer)

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Concentration Camp Liberators Oral History Project
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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: Let me turn on the recorder. Can you give me your full name and spell it for me, please?

James Rose: James, J-a-m-e-s, Rose, R-o-s-e.

MH: And what's your date of birth?

JR: 7-3-24 [July 3, 1924].

MH: Okay. You've lived in Toledo all your life?

JR: Yup, I was born and raised here till I went in the Army, then I come back to Toledo.

MH: You know who Jamie Farr is?

JR: My hearing is a little rough.

MH: Oh, I said, do you know who Jamie Farr is?

JR: Jamie Farr? I sure do. He's a golfer from Toledo.

MH: He was Klinger on *M*A*S*H*.

JR: Huh?

MH: He was Klinger on *M*A*S*H*.

JR: Yeah.

MH: I worked with him in Los Angeles.

JR: You did?

MH: Yup, he used to bring out hot dogs from Tony Packo's.

JR: Oh, you know Tony Packo's then, huh?

MH: I've never been there, but I've eaten their hot dogs.

JR: He brought them out them out there for you?

MH: Yep.

JR: Yeah, Tony Packo's is a great name for Toledo.

MH: Yep. So, you were in the 42nd Division, 242nd Infantry Regiment.

JR: If you want me to start it, I went into the Army when I was eighteen. I had to sign up for the draft; that was March 1, 1943. And they shipped me out to Oregon and had me in a quartermaster [unit]. I said I didn't sign up for that, so they stuck me with the general hospital that was leaving for England. We did finally get over to England, got there March 11, 1944, and we set up a general hospital because the Normandy invasion was gettin' ready and they needed a hospital. It was going to be the worst patients at general hospital. So, we had the Normandy invasion, and I was carrying stuff out of ambulances that was coming off of the beaches.

MH: Did you go in on D-Day?

JR: No, no, I didn't go. I was with the general hospital.

MH: Okay. Now I understand.

JR: When the casualties started coming in, I was carrying them out of the ambulances into the wards in the hospital. And we was getting the worst of the casualties: blown apart, legs blowed off, arms, and bad gut wounds, and I seen an awful lot. And then they had—they got ashore and they had lost so many men, they didn't have—and they lost an awful lot of medics, so they needed medics. So, they put out a call for medics, and there were six of us from the general hospital that went and volunteered.

MH: Was your MOS [Military Occupational Specialty] as a medic?

JR: Excuse me?

MH: Was your MOS as a medic? Your specialty?

JR: Yeah.

MH: Okay.

JR: And then—when they had you in there, they taught you all through combat or anything else what you had to do, and different things on it. Anyhow, I ended up with the 42nd. They had come over as a replacement for an infantry rifle company, come over for replacing because they lost so many men on that Normandy beachhead. And they was replenishing the troops, and the medics was one of them. I was in the foxholes and foothills of the Harz Mountains there, in Wingen, France. We were in the foxholes, and the fifteenth of March, 1944—

MH: Forty-five [1945].

JR: Forty-four [1944].

MH: Forty-five [1945].

JR: Forty-five [1945], yeah, forty-five [1945]. We jumped off at the Germans and they pushed into a minefield, and they was hitting us with a lot of heavy artillery and mortars. We was getting casualties like you wouldn't believe, and I was right up when the first man stepped on a mine and he hollered, "Medic!" And I run over to him and walked about the same way he was; didn't know where the mines were. I got a hold of him and I picked him up, and I didn't try to stop any bleeding or anything, because he wasn't bleeding. It was just right after it happened. Carried him back out of the minefield and litter bearers were there. We put him on the litter and they carried him back to the aid station.

MH: Where in Germany were you at that point?

JR: This was in France, in the foothills of the Harz Mountains near Wingen, France. And it was right close to Germany. There was about three more, and I seen two of them get their leg blowed off, when they're running and they'd hit the mine, and it'd flip them up and hit the ground; they'd get up and try to run and they couldn't. They'd go down with the leg off. I carried them out. And then, in the wooded area, there was an engineer, and we seen the engineers probing with bayonets. This one near an 88 exploded—this was German artillery—and it exploded in the tree. The tree burst, and I felt the concussion from the shell when it exploded. Somebody hollered, "Medic!" and I seen him laying over, so I ran in to him and I looked at his face: his helmet was split up and his head and his face was bleeding real fierce. So, I put compresses on him, and I taped it tight on his

face, and I picked him up and carried him out of the minefield, and they hauled him back to the aid station.

MH: Were you hit during any of this time?

JR: Nope, I wasn't hit; all I felt was a concussion. I thought I was going to get blown apart, because I didn't know where the mines were. The guys were stepping on them and I was walking up to 'em, picking them up and carrying them back to get them out of there.

MH: Was the ground still snow-covered?

JR: Nope.

MH: No? Okay.

JR: Nope. The snow wasn't on the ground then. And finally I got—all total, I got five men with the legs blowed off, and I got this one that was the engineer that was digging the mines. I got him out of there. We got a break. One of the Germans surrendered and he comes in, and they found the guide line. They had a line through that minefield in the woods, and they got us organized and we started going through the line toward the Germans. So, I got behind the platoon I was with, and they went through and got out of the minefield. And then we start chasing the Germans, and we would run into different fire—they were retreating, and we'd get into different firefights with them. You want me to continue?

MH: Sure.

JR: Okay. Then we was working our way down towards Munich, and we were traveling into Germany; then we got down at the Danube River, and we crossed the Danube River, and we got on the other side of the river. That was where the river—it was run-off water from the Alps Mountains, and this was in the spring of the year. The flat land on these rivers had no houses or anything for part of it, because they'd get covered with water when the snow melted.

We went across this open field, and our forward observer, Lieutenant Dunham—he was our forward artillery observer. And they started to fire point blank artillery at us. Flat projectile, you know what that is?

MH: Yes.

JR: And the shells was exploding. Lieutenant Dunham was close and the explosion—he stopped and was trying to get a position so he could call artillery down on them, and they hit close to him and it knocked him down and out. I run over to him, and he—I couldn't find any bones on him, he wasn't bleeding. So, I picked him up and started to carry him and I hollered at a driver to help me, so we carried him out of position. They did knock that gun out after that.

MH: How big a guy were you at the time?

JR: He was a pretty big man.

MH: No, how big were you?

JR: I was 5'11" and 180 lbs. And I had worked out with weights.

MH: Ah. Okay.

JR: When I was a kid—I wasn't very healthy when I was little, but I started building my body up, so I had a pretty good body.

MH: That's a good thing.

JR: And then we got across and we were on the move again, chasing the Germans. We were headed in the direction towards Dachau. We didn't know this at the time.

MH: That was my question: Did you know anything about the concentration camps at that point?

JR: The what?

MH: Did you know anything about the concentration camps at that point?

JR: Nothing. No, we had seen some of the different camps, but we didn't know anything about Dachau.

MH: Did you—you said you saw some of the smaller camps?

JR: Excuse me?

MH: You saw some of the camps?

JR: We went through close to some of them, (inaudible) and some of them others, but nothing like this Dachau.

MH: I know, but—tell me about the first camp you saw, before Dachau.

JR: You know something, that part didn't stick in my head as much as Dachau. Because we did see—we had somebody from our division and our troop get captured, and eventually they ended up in Dachau.

MH: Ah, okay.

JR: And we were headed still for Dachau. And we was goin' along, and all of a sudden we started getting a smelly odor. And it was a real stench, a bad odor. And the lieutenant come along and hollered, "Everybody check your gas masks, we're headed for a place"—they figured they got a mine gas dump. Everybody had got rid of their gas masks, but I had mine yet.

MH: That's what I thought; most guys threw their gas masks away.

JR: They were putting loot in their gas masks.

MH: Right.

JR: And pretty soon the lieutenant come back again and hollered, “Everybody open them gas masks up; somebody stole the colonel’s (inaudible).” (laughs) I remember that real good, because I had my gas mask yet. And then we were on a long, long time, marching, and the smell was getting stronger and stronger. Oh, it was really getting awful wretched. And we was coming up to this town, and it was Dachau. And we come up to where the camp is.

MH: Did you see the train first?

JR: The what?

MH: The train?

JR: I still didn’t—

MH: The train that was outside the camp?

JR: No, no, the train was inside the camp. It was not—

MH: The train with about forty cars that had all the bodies in them?

JR: Yup, this was inside of the camp itself. There were tracks going into the camp, with a very large gate for the opening of it. And there were—we could see bodies that was piled up higher than this fence and that around, a lot of bodies, and we come up to it. The 45th [Infantry Division] was on the west—east side of us—and we were on the west side of Dachau. And they opened this big gate up, and a lot of skeletons with skin stretched on ’em coming out, coming out through that gate. And they were smelly. And they had the ovens going. There was nine ovens in there, and they had—one of them was really

burning. They had these bodies all piled up in there, and they were throwing them in them ovens.

MH: Did you see that happen?

JR: Oh, I sure as heck did. And they were awful smelly.

MH: How long did you spend inside the camp walking around?

JR: Into the camp?

MH: Yeah.

JR: I got enough to get inside and see some of it. Now, we didn't stay in it very long. Part of the troops went in and grabbed the Germans that was in there, and it was SS troopers.

MH: Okay. Were you involved in that?

JR: Nope. No, I was behind the platoon. I was with the 1st Platoon of the 1st Regiment. I seen the people that was coming out of there and this stuff, and they had us moving on. So, we come back out of the camp, and I did see the boxcars lined up there, and they had the boxcars they was opening. And I didn't see it, but they found one body, one man that was in the middle of that stuff, alive. The rest of 'em was dead. He did die after that, I know.

MH: Wait, he did die after that?

JR: Yeah, he died after that.

MH: How'd you find that out? Because I know the guy who saw him move and who carried him—I have a photo of him carrying the man.

JR: Yeah. Well, I wasn't there at the time.

MH: His name was—the soldier's name was Tony Cardinale.¹

JR: Don't ring a bell.

MH: Okay. How do you know the guy died?

JR: We were told.

MH: Oh, okay.

JR: We were told after that. We were told that the guy was alive yet, and then after that they told us that he was the only one and he'd passed away.

MH: He'd passed away. Let's go back inside the camp. You went through the gates —'cause I thought they were trying to keep the prisoners inside the gates and not let them wander out.

JR: Oh, they come piling out of that thing like you wouldn't believe. And I mean, the stench was so horrible that everybody was throwing up. I understand even Eisenhower went up there, and when he did, he threw up. You couldn't help but throw up, it was that rancid.

MH: What did you see—take me through as you're walking through the camp toward where the ovens were. What are you seeing?

JR: Well, the ovens was right up close where this gate was. I seen the ovens and I seen dead bodies all over the place, and they had them piled up high. And it was so rancid and so horrible that just even to think about it, I'm almost throwing up. It was really rancid.

¹Anthony "Tony" Cardinale was also interviewed for the Concentration Camp Liberators Oral History Project. The DOI for his interview is C65-00016.

MH: Did you go into any of the other buildings?

JR: Nope, they moved us out. And I guess more troops came up to go in and go after the guards that was in there. But I happened to be right at the gate when they opened it up.

MH: What do you talk about with your buddies when you leave a place like that?

JR: Now we know why we were fighting this war. And that's what they were saying. They said, "Now we know the way them people were treated. Now we know why we were fighting this war."

MH: Did you hear any shooting going on when you were there?

JR: (laughs) Oh, yes. Not too far from us, on the other side, the 45th was doing some shooting. They got into where the guards and the SS troops and all them were, yeah.

MH: And so you heard that going on.

JR: Yup.

MH: When you're in the camp like that and shooting breaks out, what do you—I mean, do you want to run back out, do you just stop what you're doing? How do you react?

JR: Well, we knew from the fire that it wasn't being fired at us, but we could hear the firing of the weapons. So, they moved us on out and on the road, and we were heading up the line to get out of there.

MH: Yeah. Did you ever see any other camps, once you got past Dachau?

JR: Nothing that sticks in my mind like Dachau. We'd seen prisoners walk out when we'd get into a town; I guess they were releasing them or something, because we'd see

American troops. Some of them joined up with us. But when you're fighting a war and you're trying to keep from getting shot, you're not building too much up on that. Dachau was something different. We smelled it for so long. I would say probably about—maybe ten, twelve, or fourteen miles we walked before we got there, so we smelled it for one hell of a long time.

MH: I see. And you were walking, not riding?

JR: Yup, walking.

MH: When did you finally come home to the United States?

JR: Excuse me?

MH: When did you finally come home?

JR: I got home January 15, 1946.

MH: And you went back to Toledo?

JR: Yup.

MH: Did you tell people about Dachau when you got home?

JR: Yes, I told them. And I had one woman who said, "I don't believe it, it's not true." And I told her she was a goddamn liar, to her face, because I seen it.

MH: That was right after you got home that she said it wasn't true?

JR: It was quite a while after that.

MH: Yeah. Have you run into other people who said it didn't happen?

JR: Really, when I first come home, I didn't say too much about it.

MH: That was what I was getting at.

JR: I didn't say too much about it. But it was there; it was in my head.

MH: When did you get married?

JR: Uh—

Florence Rose: Forty-nine [1949].

JR: Nineteen forty-nine, December 20.

MH: When did you first tell your wife about Dachau?

FR: Long time.

JR: Long time, was it?

FR: I really didn't hear—

JR: She's hearing you.

MH: I know, I can hear her.

JR: She didn't hear anything about it, she said, till 1990.

MH: Really?

JR: I wasn't telling everybody a lot about it, no. I was pretty quiet for quite a while.

MH: Can you put your wife on the phone for one minute?

JR: Yeah, and she can tell you some things.

MH: Ask her to pick up the phone.

JR: Her name is Florence.

MH: Okay.

FR: Hello?

MH: Hi, Florence, my name is Mike.

FR: Hi, Mike.

MH: Your husband didn't tell you about this until 1990?

FR: No. Right. I seen what medals he did have, because he did take 'em out and look at 'em. But he put everything in the bottom drawer, and that's where it stayed until we joined the VFW [Veterans of Foreign Wars] post in 1990: then he started talking, because he was going to the schools and talking to kids. But before that, all there was—I knew he was dreaming and stuff like that.

MH: Tell me about his dreaming.

FR: Oh, it was like he was fighting, throwing his arms and kicking and hollering and screaming. Yeah, that went on for—he still does that a little bit yet, especially when he’s talking about it and when he goes to bed, a lot of times he dreams about it. Yeah.

MH: When he first told you about Dachau, what was that experience like? Do you remember where you were when he first told you?

FR: We was at one of the schools. Yeah, with the kids was when he first talked about it. I think it was Northview School, and he was talking about it and one of the little kids—one of the boys got up and threw his hand up and said, “I want to talk about Dachau because my grandmother was from there.” Which was weird ’cause a lot of the kids didn’t even talk, they just sat there and wouldn’t raise their hand, but he did. He questioned Jim about Dachau ’cause his grandmother was from there. He really talked about it.

MH: Were you shocked at some of the things that he told you?

FR: Oh, yeah. Well, I still am. ’Course, right now, he’s talked about it enough that—I mean, I hear the story over and over and over. So, I know that this is all in his head, because he keeps telling the same thing all the time. Yeah. Yes, I was shocked, very much.

MH: And it still affects him now.

FR: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah, there’s times it still does. Yeah, at night.

MH: Has he ever gone over to the VA to get some help for this?

FR: We just did. We just signed—we went August 15 because he’s got a problem, like, with memory? Like right now, not far back, but now. So, we went there to get help because our doctor told us to, and we went August 15, and they are saying now they want him to come in there and see this one doctor because they’re saying it’s service-connected.

MH: It sounds like he has post-traumatic stress disorder.

FR: Oh, he does, oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Yup. So, he's got to make an appointment to go in there now and see this doctor, and they're talking about putting him on, like, a disability, because it's service-connected, is what they're saying. The problem right now is service-connected.

MH: Right. They should be able to help with the nightmares.

FR: Oh, yeah, yeah. Well, right now they got him on this new pill that's called Aricept, and I can see a little difference in it. He was only on the five mgs [milligrams] for thirty days, and then he's going to start on the ten and that's what he'll stay on. But I can see a difference in the five mgs, which helps a little bit.

MH: I'm curious: it took him forty-five years before he told you anything about this. Why do you think it took so long?

FR: I don't know; he just didn't talk about it. Just didn't talk about it. Like I said, once we joined the VFW, it seemed like then that's when people were talkin', and so he started talking about it. Then they got the men to go together and go to the schools and talk to kids, and that's when he started talking about it more. 'Cause we got CDs with all of it on and everything, we have all that. Yeah.

MH: Do you guys have children?

FR: No, we don't. Now, we have—well, my twin sister was married to his brother. They had four kids. And so, their kids are like ours because we're so close.

MH: Did he ever tell those kids about it?

FR: Now, yeah, now. They know about it now, yeah. And they just—they're in total shock when he tells about it. They just can't believe it. It's hard to believe all he went through.

MH: What medals did he win?

FR: Oh, Lordy, I can't tell you what they are. He can. (laughs)

MH: Okay, put him back on. Thank you for talking to me.

FR: Okay. Thank you. Here he is.

(to JR) He wants to know about the medals.

JR: Yeah?

MH: Hi. What medals did you win over there?

JR: Well, I didn't know anything about it till after I got home. They sent me a letter telling me that I'd earned a Bronze Star medal for going into the minefields. I've had people say that should have been a Silver Star, but I didn't even know I was going to get any at all until they sent it to me.

MH: Were you hit?

JR: No, but I was awful close.

MH: You were awful close. (laughs) I guess "close" doesn't get a Purple Heart.

JR: I could hear them damn bullets snappin' and the shrapnel going by me; when it does it makes an awful noise, especially a machine gun.

MH: Yes. So, you have the Bronze Star for valor, and all the European theater awards?

JR: Come back a step?

MH: I said, you have the Bronze Star for valor—the Bronze Star.

JR: The Bronze Star. I can read this citation to you. I've got the second Bronze Star, and it took fifty-four years to get that.

MH: You have two Bronze Stars?

JR: Yup.

MH: Both for valor?

JR: One with oak leaves.

MH: Both for valor?

JR: That was for earning the Combat Medic Badge. And I can—that was fifty-four years later. I didn't go into the VFW post until 1994, I think it was, and I got a letter—I seen a magazine that said, "If you want your World War II medals, you can call a number." Now, I got this paper in front of me. It says, "Department of the Army, ARPERCEN [Army Reserve Personnel Center], St. Louis, Missouri. Authorization for issuing of awards, twenty-sixth of June 1997. It says "10." Ten says Bronze Star Medal. It says "Oak leaf cluster, Bronze, 1." Then it says "32. West Germany Class." That was occupational medal; we did occupy for a while. Then it says "48." 48 is the Combat Medic Badge. Then it says nothing else. And that was sent after I seen in a book where it says if you want your medals.

MH: Right. Do you have a photo of yourself from World War II?

JR: Yeah, I got a photo at home. I think Greg's got a copy—I'm not sure, but I think he does. When I was eighteen years old. Yup.

MH: What I'd like to do is to get a photo of you from World War II and a picture of you today.

JR: If I get your—I can send you a copy of the one I took when I went into the Army, first went in.

MH: Okay. You don't have any from Germany, do you?

JR: No.

MH: No? Okay.

JR: I have one that was in—that they took, somebody took. I went on leave to Paris. And it was in a rickshaw with two other guys, I don't even remember who they were. They were somebody else in Paris, and we got together and we took a ride on a rickshaw. And somebody took a picture and I don't know how I got that.

MH: Okay. What I'd like to do is I'll send you an envelope, and if you can send me these pictures, I'll copy them on a scanner, into my computer, and then I'll send them back to you? Would that work?

JR: A computer?

MH: Yeah. I'll send you an envelope, a mailing envelope, and if you can send the pictures to me—what I'd like is a picture of you as you are now and a picture—

JR: Can we get your address?

MH: I'll send you an envelope, and you can send it to me.

FR: He's gonna send you an envelope, Jim.

JR: Okay.

MH: And then I'll return the photos to you.

FR: Okay.

MH: Okay? And if you could ask your wife to pick out a nice picture of you today.

JR: Yeah, she can do that.

MH: Okay. So, I'll send that to you.

FR: What size does he want?

JR: What size you want?

MH: It doesn't matter, 'cause I'll scan it on the computer.

FR: Okey-dokey.

JR: One coming from the mine fields. And I looked in a book, and it says if you want your medals from World War II—that was fifty-four years later. I called the number and they said, "Oh, yeah," so they sent me stuff. And I had one I got that says—that first one. I got a letter and it says—I'll read it to you. It says, "Mr. Rose, I received your request dated twenty-eighth of January 1946 concerning the award of the Bronze Star medal. I have the honor to inform you that by correction of the President, the Bronze Star medal has been awarded to you. The citation is as follows," and it reads it out. You want to hear it?

MH: Yes, I do.

JR: "For meritorious achievements in action on the fifteenth of March 1945, near Wingen, France. When two companies were attacking through the foothills of the Harz Mountains, numerous casualties occurred from mines and heavy enemy fire.

Disregarding his own safety, Private Rose continuously passed through the mine area under intense artillery fire in order to administer necessary medical treatment to the wounded. He aided an evacuation of six casualties. Private Rose's courageous attention to the wounded assisted in saving many lives. 16 November 1945, Headquarters, 42nd Infantry Division, Private Desk Service Command, Fort Hayes, Columbus, Ohio," who will select for giving me the medal.

And then a letter comes, and this one, it says, "The White House." "James A. Rose, to you who answered the call of your country and served in its armed forces to bring about the total defeat of the enemy, I extend a heartfelt thanks of a grateful nation. As one of the nation's finest, you undertook the most severe task one can be called upon to perform, because you demonstrated the fortitude, resourcefulness and calm judgment necessary to carry out that task. We now look to you for leadership and example and for escalating our country in peace. Harry Truman, the White House."

MH: Very nice, very nice. Thank you very much for taking the time to talk to me.

JR: I can give you a copy of that one, too, if you want it.

MH: Okay, when I send you the envelope for the pictures.

JR: Excuse me?

MH: When I send you an envelope for the pictures.

JR: We will.

MH: Okay. Thank you very much, sir, I appreciate it—and thank your wife for me, too. Bye-bye.

End of interview