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# Clifford B. Selwood oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, August 20, 2008

Clifford B. Selwood (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, give me your full name and spell it for me, please?

**Clifford Selwood:** Sure. What are we gonna talk about?

MH: We're gonna talk about your experience in World War II.

CS: (laughs) Generally, okay. Clifford B., as in "boy," Selwood, S-e-l-w-o-o-d.

MH: And your address, please?

CS: Junior on the end of it, if you want that.... And phone number, you have that.

MH: ... What's your date of birth?

CS: 12-30-23 [December 30, 1923].

MH: Okay, and you were with the 99<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division.

CS: Right.

MH: Which got to, I believe, a place called Mühldorf, although there were some others on the way. Where were you before you went in the service, and what were you doing?

CS: What do you mean? I was in college before I went in.

MH: Where were you in college?

CS: Down at the University of Miami. I went out of there into the—inducted into Camp Blanding, Florida. That's where I was sworn in. And then they shipped me from there to Camp Swift in Texas.

MH: What year was that?

CS: Forty-four [1944].

MH: Okay.

CS: No, wait, that can't be right—forty-three [1943].

MH: Forty-three [1943]?

CS: In forty-four [1944], I was in Europe. (laughs)

MH: Okay.

CS: No, it was in forty-two [1942].

MH: Forty-two [1942], okay. So, when did you join the 99<sup>th</sup>?

CS: We joined them in forty-four [1944], December or January of—December of forty-four [1944]—the last part, or beginning of forty-five [1945].

MH: And where was that?

CS: Did I say forty-five [1945]? Yeah.

MH: Yeah.

CS: I'm getting my years mixed up.

MH: That's okay. Where did you join the 99<sup>th</sup>?

CS: Elsenborn Ridge.

MH: Helsenborn?

CS: Elsenborn.

MH: Elsenborn. So, you went over as a replacement?

CS: I was—no, I've got a long history of things I was involved in. I went overseas with the 69<sup>th</sup> Division, and we landed in Southampton and stayed at—the outfit I was in was billeted at a place called (inaudible). I can't tell you the spelling on the thing, something like (inaudible) near Winchester. And went from—about that time the Bulge was breaking, and they came to the 69<sup>th</sup> Division and stripped it of us, and a bunch of other soldiers, and sent us over as replacements for the 99<sup>th</sup>. Or at least we landed in the 99<sup>th</sup>; we were sent over as replacements into—across into Le Havre and took off from there.

MH: So you go to the 99<sup>th</sup> as a replacement, and you joined them at where?

CS: Elsenborn Ridge.

MH: And where is that?

CS: That's in Germany [*sic*].<sup>1</sup>

MH: Was that your first combat?

CS: First combat.

MH: What was that like?

CS: Well, it was kind of interesting. In a facetious sort of way, because—pardon me, let me clear my throat. I'm hoarse this morning for some reason.

MH: Sure, no problem. Okay.

CS: (clears throat) That's what comes, I guess, from smoking too many cigarettes.  
(laughs)

MH: That'll do it to you.

CS: No, we went up to Elsenborn Ridge. We were trucked up there—we went up partially by train and we were trucked up to Elsenborn Ridge, and that's where they met us and took us up to the front.

MH: When you say you went up by train, they put you in the 40 and 8s?

CS: From Le Havre, hell, I had no idea where we were going or anything else like that.

MH: And you were riding in a freight car.

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<sup>1</sup> Elsenborn Ridge is in Belgium, near the town of Elsenborn.

CS: We were riding in a freight car to a town outside of Elsenborn, where we billeted overnight and got off the trains, then got on trucks and they trucked us into Elsenborn itself.

MH: How close was that to the front?

CS: Well, in terms of miles?

MH: In terms of how close the shooting was going on.

CS: Damn close.

MH: Damn close, okay.

CS: Right. Elsenborn was saddled with a bunch of the rear echelon do-gooders who had nice hot meals and everything like that, but that's where we would go back to the front to freshen up with showers and get our clothes changed and what have you. We were within walking distance of the front itself.

MH: Incoming artillery?

CS: Incoming artillery, mortar, fire rifle shots, the whole ball of wax. I was there about—I guess maybe a week—before my baptism of fire: [it] consisted of a combat patrol where we were—part of our company, my squad and I were selected—a group of about thirty people—to go across over and pick a fight with the Germans who were in the swale, in a forest on the other side of a swale up on top of the ridge. And that was my baptism of fire.

MH: Were you hit then?

CS: No. No, we went over there with a group of thirty; we had the lieutenant and eleven of us who came back. The others were wounded or killed or captured. And all we had was eleven that came back; and of those, I understood it to be about eight of them, seven or eight of them all had little minor wounds. For some crazy reason, I was lucky enough not to get hit by anything.

MH: And you were carrying an M1?

CS: I was carrying an M1. I was an assistant squad leader at the time.

MH: What was your rank?

CS: I'm sorry?

MH: What was your rank?

CS: At that time, I was just a corporal. I came over—my squad leader that I was assigned to on the way back from that combat patrol—we called it a suicide patrol. Although the rest of us got back, he had his foot blown off when he stepped on a mine over there. So, I got the elevation. And they gave me the squad for the rest of the war.

MH: You got sergeant stripes?

CS: Yeah, staff sergeant.

MH: Staff sergeant. At what point did you know anything about the concentration camps or the slave labor camps?

CS: Oh, we had heard about them, rumors of them and things of that nature. You know how the grapevine works; it works its way around. But to actually see any of the fellows, any of the men that were in those things, it was well south after we had crossed the Danube: down in that area, down around Munich and coming in through there. I was in the 394<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division

MH: Regiment?

CS: Regiment, Company B.

MH: Company B of the 394<sup>th</sup>.

CS: First squad, third platoon.

MH: Okay. Some things you never forget.

CS: Ain't that the truth?

MH: I'll bet you remember your serial number, too.

CS: Damn right.

MH: I know. Did the Army—did the chain of command ever tell you anything about these camps, to be prepared to see this stuff?

CS: Not that I ever recall. We were kind of down the echelon; being squad leaders and being in the squads, we didn't get much contact with any captains. Certainly saw never—never saw any doggone officers of any type other than our platoon leaders, which we couldn't keep. When I say we couldn't keep 'em, they were smart alecks: they came over, ninety-day wonders, and they'd give us a platoon and they wouldn't follow our suggestions and keep your butt down and your head covered. They'd go out and think they were going to be some sort of heroes, and first thing you know, they're gone. They'd been wounded. So, we went through the combat for the most part, until the very end, with a staff sergeant—well, he was a tech sergeant—in charge of the platoon.

MH: What was the first camp you remember seeing, or the first thing like that?

CS: I don't know the name—that's what I said. I'd talked at length with Bob Humphrey on this and have no idea what the names of those places were.

MH: What did it look like?

CS: Well, this particular one that we saw was all fenced in with about a fifteen-foot fence around it, gates and so forth. And all these skeletons were walking around, living skeletons, barely clothed or anything else like that in 'em. They broke it open, and they

just swamped the town that we were in, and I can't—don't recall exactly the name of the town, either.

MH: When you say they swamped the town, what did they do?

CS: Well, we let them out of the camp. And they were running—when I say they were running, hell, they could hardly walk. They were nothing but skin and bones, and they had raggedy garments surrounding them, and some had their shoes, their feet wrapped up in cloth or rags of some sort. Some only had papers, newspapers or something of that nature around them, and like I say, they were just nothing but living skeletons.

MH: This is in April of forty-five [1945]?

CS: It was before that—well, it was April, the end of March or April. Wherever we were at that particular moment after we'd gone past Munich and down through the rest of Bavaria there.

MH: When they went into the town, what did they do?

CS: Well, they were just grabbing anything they could grab that would keep them warm or anything like that. My particular squad, we had a billet assigned to us temporarily, and heck, we got upstairs—or the guys did—and we just tore everything out, all the clothing we could find or put our hands on and threw it out the second story window down to these people so they could keep warm. They were looking for food. I got from my best friend over there, who's the platoon leader at the time, he said he was witness to them fighting over a dead cat, because they were so starve—you know, starving to death. I personally witnessed this one old straggly poor old guy, skinny as heck, got alongside the billet that we were in, and it was kind of a, you know, residential area. But they used to make their sauerkraut in great big barrels, and the same with lard. And this guy got into the side of that, just grabbing hands full of the lard and sticking it in his mouth and eating it like it was ice cream and grabbing a hand full of this fermenting sauerkraut and did the same thing, wild-eyes on him. I can visualize and see the guy right now. And I tried to get him to not gorge himself like that because, hell, putting that in an empty stomach, it would kill him anyway.

MH: A lot of GIs gave stuff, gave food to people, and it did kill them.

CS: Yeah. They'd raid the cellars; the cellars were raided. Everything we could we gave out, you know, put out on the street. And it was so cold then. Patches of snow were still around and it was just as cold as the devil.

MH: Were you able to speak to any of these people?

CS: I'm sorry?

MH: Were you able to speak to any of these people?

CS: No. Just barely, just barely. I'd picked up a lot of pidgin German, you know, and I could communicate to a degree with them, but they were not communicable. They were wild—they couldn't believe that we were letting them out of the doggone camp.

MH: You say you literally unlocked the gates? Or shot the lock off, or—?

CS: Well, when I saw it, the gates had been thrown open. And some of them were still in there, couldn't—were making no effort to get—they were just hanging on the fence, not really believing what they were seeing, that they had been freed. I don't know if this was a prison camp, labor camp or what, as such.

MH: But it's in Bavaria somewhere.

CS: Oh, yeah.

MH: How many of those inmates do you think you saw in the camp; could you estimate it?

CS: No.

MH: I mean, are we talking tens, or are we talking hundreds or thousands?

CS: We're talking about a limited number; it sure wasn't thousands. No, I didn't go into the camp itself; we were on the outskirts of it. We'd been escorted in there and riding tanks and trucks to get in there.

MH: You were riding tanks from which unit, do you remember?

CS: No, no. You know, just hitching a ride. We weren't driving them or operating them. (laughs) Just ride 'em.

MH: No, I understand. I mean, there were a number of armored divisions in the area. And it could have been like the 14<sup>th</sup> Armored was in the area, trying to see—the 11<sup>th</sup> Armored was in the area. The Germans had already left the camps—there was no fighting?

CS: No, no fighting.

MH: And in this town, were the civilians around?

CS: I don't recall ever seeing any. When you say, I put it blankly—there might have been a few that I saw cursorily, but they weren't doing anything except sticking their heads out a window or something like that to see what was going on. There were flags that were out some of the windows—you know, surrender flags.

MH: You mean what, like white bed sheets?

CS: White flags of some sort. In several of the places—but they had essentially, for all practical purposes, vacated the town themselves.

MH: How long did you stay in that town?

CS: Oh, just a couple of days at best.

MH: Were the prisoners that you saw, that you were throwing clothing and food to, were they men and women, or just men?

CS: You know, I've thought about that, and I don't really recall any women. Not at this point in time. There might have been some—most all of them were men.

MH: So, the purpose of staying in the town for a couple of days would have been what?

CS: Just to temporarily recoup and move on.

MH: How do you finally get the word—if everybody's living in different houses, how do you finally get the word that we're moving out?

CS: Oh, hell, that was—we had runners, you know, in the company, and what have you. Between the company and the squads and battalions and so forth, they'd run up and down and give the messages and we would pass them on.

MH: So, was it just your company in that town?

CS: No, there might have been the whole—

MH: The whole battalion?

CS: —maybe even part of the rest of the battalion.

MH: And then when you move out, you're walking or you're in trucks?

CS: Yes.

MH: No riding in trucks or tanks?

CS: No, no.

MH: So, you came to another one of these places or something like it?

CS: No, I don't recall any other ones. We heard that there were some others in Moosburg or someplace like that. Now, I don't know whether we were there or whether we were in another town similarly located, but it was in that general area. Just a catchy name, that's the only reason I remember it: Moosburg.

MH: When you confront this sort of thing and you see it, what do you think about? Do you talk about it with the other guys?

CS: No, we just take it as (inaudible) such and—can you hold on just a minute—

MH: Sure.

CS: My wife is—

MH: No problem.

CS: —bedridden and she's just buzzing me. I'll just be on the phone (inaudible) talk to her.

MH: No problem.

***Pause in recording***

MH: This'll—I know you have to go; this'll only take a couple more minutes. I was asking if you had talked about this stuff amongst the guys.

CS: Well, we remarked about it, of course. We were aggravated as hell with the Germans in general and the whole fighting and what have you, but we accumulated there or gathered there in our billets and chop up whatever wood we could. We'd chase chickens down, and raid the cellars for eggs or food of any type whatsoever that was fresh, instead of K rations that we lived on and that sort of thing. But other than being disgusted with what we were seeing, that had been the nature of it.

MH: Did it change your attitude toward the Germans you were fighting against in the next couple of weeks?

CS: At that particular time, you're kind of frozen in time. And on the circumstances, you're paying attention to what's going on, and you're ticked off over the fact that you're having to fight these guys, and you know, a lot of them were so doggone young. It wasn't funny. They weren't a heck of a lot older than we were, or younger than we were. And I'm satisfied that many, many of them were Germans who had abandoned the ship, so to speak, and put on civilian clothes so we wouldn't think that they were, or know that they were. But as far as attitude is concerned, after the end of the war, the occupation, we, of course, handled them with kid gloves until we got to a point where we knew what they were doing and how their attitude toward us. Generally speaking, as far as our outfit is concerned and what we were exposed to, it was congenial and not hostile at all.

MH: When did you finally get home?

CS: I didn't get home until February of forty-six [1946]. Because after the end of the war when it was declared, we were in a little town, and I can remember we—(laughs) it's kind of funny, because we got word by word of mouth that the war—to hold up for three or four days, which we did, and then the rumor got around that the war was ended and they were about ready to sign a peace treaty. We couldn't believe that. But we had—just hanging out there in this little town—(inaudible) or something like that, I don't what the hell it was, and somebody was coming around passing out booze rations to the officers. And when we saw that, well, the GIs weren't getting any. We weren't getting a damn thing.

But my buddy and I in my squad, we decided to go up and talk to the doggone officer that we had in charge, the platoon leader and myself that we finally had tacked on and had been able to stick around towards the end of the war. Go to his room, wherever he was on this little first floor thing, and find out just what the heck the score was so we could pass the word on down to our own people. Nobody was telling us a darn thing at that point. So, here's a bottle of scotch sitting on the doggone table for him. Well, he wasn't there; we wanted to know where the heck he was. Well, all the officers had been called either to the company or the battalion area, wherever the heck that was located, to be critiqued on what was happening at that time. We waited and waited and finally got tired of waiting for him and said, "What the hell, let's have a drink of his booze." To make a long story short, we drank the whole damn thing. (laughs) We did have a hangover.

MH: I bet you did. Was the Army serving good scotch at least?

CS: They were serving what?

MH: Was it good scotch?

CS: Oh, it was good scotch, yeah. It was Cutty.

MH: Cutty?

CS: Yeah, I can remember that.

MH: Not bad. So, you came home to where? Where did you live?

CS: I lived right here.

MH: In Plantation?

CS: No, not in Plantation, but Miami. I lived in Miami at this point.

MH: In Miami? And what was your career for the most of your life?

CS: Attorney.

MH: An attorney?

CS: Yeah.

MH: Specializing in anything?

CS: Trial—personal injury trial. Product liability, medical malpractice.

MH: And when did you retire?

CS: In 1995, at the end of forty-four years of it.

MH: Did that experience of seeing those people in that camp and how they'd been treated ever come back to you in later life?

CS: Oh, I sometimes think about it—certainly more often earlier, when I was relating some of the stories and the things we had gone through to others. But I remember it very vividly, just as vividly as it'd happened day before yesterday. That part about it, about the camp.

MH: Right, but it's not something that gave you nightmares.

CS: No, I really—I really have never been bothered with any of these post-traumatic syndromes that everybody claims, or so many people claim they have, and the hysterical things. I have never been bothered with that from the first day on. When the war was over, it was over. (laughs)

MH: That's a good thing.

CS: We went into occupation, an army of occupation there for a while, and we were transferred over to the 1<sup>st</sup> Division, and in the 1<sup>st</sup> Division they put in a requisition for people to work at the Nuremberg War Trials. So, my friend and I, somehow or other, we were selected to go over and run the supply office for the Nuremberg War Trials. Hell, we didn't know anything more about supplies at all, (laughs) but we were put in charge. I say "put in charge;" there was a captain in charge of it, but he had the points and he was sent home, so he and I were the two that were running the whole show there for—well, for the rest of the war, until I got out. I had more points than BC did, so I came home—or started home—about November or December of forty-five [1945].

MH: You came through the war—were you ever hit?

CS: Nope.

MH: Nope. Okay.

CS: Mighty close, mighty close.

MH: And decorations?

CS: Little miracles seemed to happen. I can recall one instance right after we'd crossed the Rhine: we were on top of this hill trying to take some other houses down the line, some other villages. And they were aiming ack-ack [anti-aircraft gun] at us, and hitting the ground, having a shell burst right over the top of my head. I was in a prone position—you know, we hit the dirt at the edge of the forest there, and this thing exploded right over my head, tore up all the ground all around me, and never touched me, never touched me. I don't know how it exploded, but it burst and went out and around and the ground was torn up, but I didn't even have a piece of shell or anything else in my pack or any of my clothes or anything else.

MH: That's amazing.

CS: It is.

MH: Lucky man.

CS: It is. You just wonder what's watching over you.

MH: Where did you finally go to law school?

CS: University of Miami.

MH: Miami, that's where you got your degree from?

CS: I'm sorry?

MH: You got your law degree from there?

CS: Yeah.

MH: Anything else that I didn't ask you that I should have?

CS: About what?

MH: About the experience of the war.

CS: (inaudible) particularly?

MH: Yes, you told me some things that were very interesting that I'd never heard about the GIs going in the homes there and tossing clothes and food to the people. It's a moving scene to think about.

CS: Well, this was not only happening in our billet, it was happening up and down the street. It wasn't just one group of people, you know, doing it. There were fur coats going out there and everything else like that. They were struggling and fighting in some instances over who was going to grab what garment to throw around them.

MH: Did the GIs ever have to break up those fights?

CS: No.

MH: You just stay out?

CS: When I say the fighting—you know, struggling with each other, tug and pull, that sort of thing.

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

CS: Uh, yeah I got a whole—I've got a picture I'm looking at right now of the whole, part of the platoon. And individually I had the (inaudible), to say—I don't know exactly where it is but I do know at one time I had all my memoirs and so forth that my folks had kept: correspondence, emails and things of that nature. And that whole box was accidentally thrown away—

MH: Oh, God.

CS: —when we were cleaning up in the garage, as you might imagine. It disappeared.

MH: But you do still have a picture of yourself?

CS: I'm sure I do somewhere.

MH: If you have some time, and there's no rush at all, if you could find a picture of yourself from back then and one from today, I sure would like to have it and copy it, you know, scan it and I'll send it back to you.

CS: Just trying to think of one, one picture—I know we had our pictures taken in Nuremberg, by a professional, you know, photographer. I had that; but in combat garment and so forth and that sort of thing, no.

*End of interview*