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George Sherman oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, September 5, 2008

George Sherman (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: Okay, all set?

George Sherman: Yeah.

MH: Why don't you give me your full name and spell it for me, please?

GS: It's George Sherman, like the general. S-h-e-r-m-a-n.

MH: And your date of birth.

GS: January 22, 1926.

MH: January 22, 1926. And the unit you were in in Europe was—

GS: The 41st Calvary Squadron of the 11th Armored Division.

MH: Did you get to more than one camp?

GS: No, just Mauthausen.

MH: Just Mauthausen. Can you just begin by telling me where were you before you went in the Army and what were you doing?

GS: Before then, I lived in Brooklyn and I was going to high school. In my senior year, a month or two before graduation, I enlisted in the Army, thinking—the Army Air Corps. But I turned out to be colorblind, and I ended up in the Armored Corps, not to my choosing. Stationed and took my basic training at Fort Knox.

MH: So did I.

GS: Oh. And my MOS [Military Occupational Specialty] was actually a tank gunner on the Sherman tank; it was named after me, of course.

MH: Absolutely. And I'm sure the drill sergeants told you that.

GS: Well, I told everybody, and half the guys believed me. After that, you know, we'd leave—we went to Camp Chaffee in Fort Smith, Arkansas, and did nothing for about a month or so. And then—

MH: What month and year is this?

GS: This would be in 1944, and then in December—wait, let me get it straight here. Yeah, shipped over in 1944—and then anyway, through Camp Chaffee we went to an embarkation in New York and sailed in December for Europe.

MH: Were you on—you weren't on the *Queen Mary* or any of the—

GS: No, no, it was a Liberty ship that was turned into a—

MH: Troop ship.

GS: Troop ship.

MH: Were you going over with the division, or—

GS: No, the division was formed in about 1942, and went through maneuvers and this and that in California; it was actually started in Louisiana. And I think I gave you the wrong year. I think I'm talking forty-five [1945]. The division was in forty-two [1942]. Anyway, the division was sent over to England, and they were in England for about three or four months and was part of the 3rd Army, which was still at that point still in England. It was just shortly after D-Day, about two months after D-Day, that they were sent over to—I don't know where they actually landed, but they were part of the 3rd Army at the time, and was traveling down toward Reims. Now, this was before I was there. When the Bulge started, most of the 3rd Army, which was south of Bastogne—which I guess you know from the history—was turned around, and on a forced march they went up toward Bastogne, with a number of other divisions, of course. It was there, then, in January of forty-five [1945] that I—right outside of Houffalize—

MH: What?

GS: Houffalize in Belgium, which was very near Bastogne, and which was a key town to try and capture—not capture, but encircle. The Germans were past that, you know, in Bastogne. And it was there that the first encounter by the division took place. And of course there were casualties. I then became a replacement. I was a replacement as I was sent over. And for some reason, I drew the cavalry, which was a mechanized reconnaissance squadron.

MH: Which means you're riding what vehicle?

GS: Well, I started in a light tank but ended up in a Jeep, which we in Armored Corps called a Peep.

MH: A Peep?

GS: A Peep, but it's actually a Jeep.

MH: I see. Why'd they call it a Peep?

GS: Well, you know, General Patton had some strange idea that he originally wanted special uniforms for the Armored divisions, which never—we wore our overseas caps on the left side instead of the right side, you know. So anyway, for some reason they called the Jeeps “Peeps.”

MH: The light tank is which tank?

GS: I forgot the designation, but it had a 37mm cannon. We had—in our platoon, we had two of them and one armored car, and I think it was four of the Peeps. And I was in the scout Peep, which is the first vehicle in the line of march, by the troop.

MH: Did this have a regular windshield, or did this have the armored—

GS: It was a folding windshield.

MH: But glass.

GS: But glass.

MH: Because I’ve seen a recon Jeep that had a steel windshield with just slits in it.

GS: Nope.

MH: That’s not you guys.

GS: No. In fact, our windshield was always kept down because we had a .30 caliber machine gun mounted, actually welded to the hood. And the assistant driver, in the passenger’s seat he had that .30 caliber machine gun that he was responsible for; and the person in the back seat, which was me, had on a pedestal mount a .50 caliber machine gun.

MH: That’s a lot of firepower for a Jeep.

GS: That's a lot of firepower, and we carried—our person weapons were carbines, .30 caliber carbines.

Anyway, the reconnaissance squadron, which was made up of five troops, which you know, is the cavalry name for a company—it was the normal infantry set-up where you had a regular reconnaissance troop and you had a tank troop, light tanks, and you had the headquarters troop, et cetera. And they were usually divided up in the division between the Combat Command A and Combat Command B. Divisions were always split, almost in half, and they can go in different directions. It was very seldom—I don't even know if I can remember when the division acted in total as a division rather than in the combat command. You know.

But anyway, we worked in that Houffalize situation, and it was there that our B troop was designated to go up to a town called Malmédy, in which there was a massacre. And because we had winches on front of some of the Jeeps—Peeps—we unfortunately had the job of lassoing—they were all frozen—the dead soldiers and pulling them out of the field, taking them up to a road where the big trucks came in, and putting them into body bags, et cetera.

MH: That's where the Germans massacred what, some 350 Americans?

GS: I don't remember the total number. It was an engineering company that got caught and had to be turned into infantry, but they were overrun by the Germans, and in their haste, they made the big mistake, the Germans. Instead of treating them as prisoners of war, they just lined 'em all up in front of a forest line and machine gunned them, shot them. And the sad part about that was the commanding officer, later after the war, who they knew who it was, and he was convicted in Nuremberg and through political nonsense, believe it or not, after a few years in jail was let out and lived a very, very long life. I believe he lived in Austria at the time. Which is one of the sad parts of that tale.

But anyway, the division then, of course, in late January, they turned around the Bulge and we started offensive. And the 11th Armored with the 3rd Army, we kind of headed south and we crossed the Rhine. Anyway, we kept going and we ended up in Linz, Austria, and at that time, which was at the very early part of May, our job was to meet the Russians, and in a number of our reconnaissance—every morning we went out. We went out on one day on a particular road and ended up stumbling onto Mauthausen. We didn't know it at the time, but that's what it was.

MH: Tell me about that day. How did the day start?

GS: The day started as a normal day: each day you get an assignment, and that particular time, the division was looking for the Russians. We were somewhere on the other side of Austria. And this was literally, I don't know, maybe a week before the armistice. And on one particular—there were a number of small roads that led out of Linz, which was heading east, and we went out on that day and I don't know, two or three miles outside of Linz—and by the way, when we did those patrols, we traveled very quickly. At this point we had a heavier light tank—I'm trying to think, an M24. I forgot, but it had a 75mm cannon on it, they were much heavier, bigger light tank. We had a few of those; we did not have any armored cars at the time, which was a bad vehicle anyway: it had an open turret, which was not good. And we would travel thirty-five, forty miles, and it would just be one or two platoons from the troop. But anyway, we started smelling—there was an awful odor as you were running down the road.

MH: What time of day is this?

GS: This was kind of early in the morning. And anyway, one of the—we come up to this, looked like a barracks, I guess you would call it. It was a wooden—big wooden fences and what not. The odor was terrific.

MH: The fences are barbed wire, or they're wood?

GS: No, big wooden, like an entrance—they built like an entrance to a subdivision here in Florida. And so, anyway, we saw that and there was yelling going on.

MH: Who's yelling?

GS: Well, at the time we didn't know; we assumed it was the prisoners, because they could hear the noise. And one of the tanks came up, using it as a battering ram just went through those front doors. And then the whole platoon went in—

MH: Mounted in the vehicles, or you got down?

GS: Oh, no, mounted; we drove right in. And then stopped once you were in there, because right there, we were greeted with the sights, the piles of bodies, these people walking around like God knows—skeletons and whatnot. And we dismounted, and the scout sergeant, of course, radioed back to the squadron headquarters. He couldn't explain

what the heck it was. And about a half an hour or forty-five minutes later, a full tank battalion came up from our division, the 41st Tank Battalion, rumbling down with about twenty -odd big Sherman tanks. But anyway, the officers came.

MH: Did those tanks come inside, or did they stay on the road?

GS: No, they stayed outside. But all the men came in, and as you walk in—it's an immense place, and you came walking in and you see the barracks and people inside the barracks, and there's people walking and bodies all over the joint.

MH: What are you thinking?

GS: Well, we didn't know what the hell to think. It was like we—we had heard, by the way, through *Stars and Stripes*, we knew about a couple of the other camps that were early on, the main one [Auschwitz] being found by the Russians. So, we surmised what it was, because it was still kind of unbelievable. So, the moment the officers came, and a lot of the other parts of our squadron, the troops, it started getting crowded. We were told to get the heck out of there and continue on our mission, so I was only there no more than two hours.

MH: What are the prisoners doing when you come in?

GS: Oh, those that were ambulatory, they were mingling and hugging and asking for food and water. Some of them were pulling on, we had a few after the tank battalion came up with others—we had some medics there—and of course, whatever we had, we were giving, you know, our C rations and our D rations to them, which was really a mistake, but we didn't know it.

MH: What are D rations?

GS: They were fortified candy bars. Not like a Hershey—they were very thick; they were not particularly sweet, but they had vitamins, you know, like the health things today. And anyway, we were giving them whatever we had on us, and of course water. And then—

MH: What language are the prisoners speaking?

GS: Well, we didn't know it at the time, but there was a big mixture. And later on, I mean—you know, I looked up the history of that and found out a lot of strange things—I mean, just to fast forward later in my life, I had the opportunity to live in Spain for five years, and found out there were thousands of Spanish prisoners of war from the Spanish Civil War in Mauthausen and its sister camp, Gusen, which was a big granite quarry, which was even murder for these people because they really worked them to death there. But there were a lot of Spanish prisoners.

And then, coincidentally—I don't know if you know the name Tibor Rubin? Well, this happened, of course, much later, but there were a number of Hungarian prisoners. And this one Tibor Rubin, who came there when he was about thirteen years old, and liberated by us, he was sixteen—by the way, at that point I was eighteen—who went on afterwards to get American citizenship, join the Army, went to Korea and won the Congressional Medal of Honor. You should look his history up. He was very, very fond of the 11th Armored Division for liberating him. Anyway, there were a lot of Hungarians, and I'm sure from any number of other countries, speaking all different languages.

MH: What kind of day was it, weather-wise?

GS: Beautiful. That whole month was beautiful. In fact, we really loved it because all our memory was of late December and January around Bastogne: we froze our ass off. But in late April, early May, it was beautiful.

MH: So, I mean, you're an eighteen-year-old kid, and you're in the midst of this horror. How do you handle it? How do you not break down?

GS: Well, we didn't—as far as I, I can only speak for myself—I didn't really realize. I took a number of pictures. I liberated a camera in my travels, so I took a number of pictures, but it didn't really register on me, frankly, 'cause we had left right there. And two days later we did meet the Russians, and that day that we met them, that's when the armistice was signed. And then we were brought back to Linz and put on a what they call a “constabulary,” which we drove around and down through what they called the redoubt area, thinking that there would be a lot of SS troops trying to stay alive and fight the Americans—which never materialized. And would just run combat patrols all over the whole area and never found anything, and started getting used to what you might call garrison life.

MH: When you were inside Mauthausen, and walking around, can you sort of describe to me what you're seeing as you're walking around? Do you go into buildings; do prisoners come up and hug you? What happens?

GS: So, the prisoners—I didn't go in any buildings. The buildings were not up by the front perimeter. In other words, there was a big open area as you came through that main gate, and that whole main area was filled up by the initial vehicles. We didn't—the whole troop just drove in, but then stopped. There were these prisoners walking all around. The thing you didn't ask is, where were the German guards? That was the thing we were looking for. And there were only a handful who were at that point dead. The prisoners had beat them to death, and we were later told that the majority of them had taken off very early in the morning and the night before because they knew we were just literally four or five miles away in Linz in the big city, and they took off in our direction. We missed them; they didn't want to go where the Russians were, of course. So, they went west. But we didn't see them.

MH: So, when you're walking through the camp, you're at—at this point, you're not sure whether there were Germans there or not.

GS: That's right.

MH: So, you're carrying your carbine.

GS: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah.

MH: And you're carrying it ready to use it?

GS: Yeah, yeah. It's not on our shoulders—no, no. But then very quickly the word got around that there are none, no Germans there; and by this time, the other units pulled up, so that these people were then taken into the barracks and whatnot. And as all this was going on, the report kept going back to headquarters, because literally within hours, you had not only other units, but you had the support units coming up. You had, you know, medics coming in there, you had quartermasters coming in, that brought in trailers of water. And—

MH: I know at some point an evac hospital unit came in.

GS: I'm sure, I'm sure. Because later on, of course, we knew about it from word getting around; they brought in the major officers, a general came in and whatnot, and they dragged in all the citizens from the town.

MH: But that's not something you saw. You were gone by then.

GS: No. We were gone.

MH: When you're walking around the camp, are you walking around with a buddy or are you by yourself?

GS: Oh, no, walking around with a buddy who was in my vehicle, who—by coincidence, just last week we had our sixty-fifth reunion of our division, and he was the only one still alive. We were both eighteen. And he came from Ohio. I've seen him each year; we see each other at these reunions. And you know, we remember that part of it. We generally—you know, you generally stayed with the people who were in your vehicle.

MH: What's his name?

GS: Don, D-o-n, Don Behm, B-e-h-m.

MH: And where does he live?

GS: He lives in Ohio. I have his address if you want.

MH: When you have time. So, the two of you are walking through this camp, having a conversation, or just sort of dumbfounded at what you're seeing?

GS: Dumbfounded. And the people, you know, prisoners coming up to us and not knowing, you know, not knowing what to say. Frankly, it's hard to even remember it. But it's just, you have no words. You're looking at this and it's kind of hard to believe.

MH: You stopped and took pictures?

GS: Yeah, I took a bunch of pictures, and it ended up—I still have about three of them, four of them.

MH: So, the war ends and you're on what, occupation duty?

GS: I was on occupation duty—yeah, actually about a month after the war ended, the 11th Armored was disbanded, and not having enough points, I was transferred to the 4th Armored Division. And I stayed with the 4th Armored Division until May of forty-six [1946] when I came back to the States.

MH: So, May of forty-six [1946]. You were there a full year.

GS: I was there a full year afterward.

MH: So, what do you do when you get home, finally?

GS: When I came home, first thing I did is, I got engaged to my girlfriend, and then enrolled in college, and we got married in Thanksgiving of forty-six [1946].

MH: Where were you living?

GS: At that time, I was a New Yorker. I lived in—well, I didn't—I'm a Brooklyn boy, but I didn't live there, because when I went to war—I have three brothers; all four of us were in the service, and my parents sold the house and moved into New York City. They took an apartment. And when I came back, I lived at that apartment four or five months until I got married. And then my wife and I, we went back and we did have an apartment in Brooklyn, because I went to college in Brooklyn, Long Island University. And we lived in New York until I graduated about five years later. I graduated college.

MH: What'd you get your degree in?

GS: Accounting. And didn't practice it, because when I did graduate, they were paying—in those days, in order to get your CPA certificate, you needed to be a junior accountant for three years with a CPA firm, and they were paying \$35 to \$45 a week. Which I couldn't—after all those years, couldn't manage. So I got a job with a company, Everlast Sporting Goods.

MH: Boxing gloves.

GS: Boxing gloves, right, but at that time they were making all kinds of leather punching bags, baseball gloves, et cetera for the military. But they still made the boxing gloves for Madison Square Garden, and that was one of my jobs. Every Friday night, I took the gloves up to Madison Square Garden. Funny thing. But anyway, then, since my wife was actually originally from Philadelphia, we moved to Philadelphia. Her father had a heart attack and we went to help out there. And we stayed there in Philadelphia, and we lived in Philadelphia until we went to Spain.

MH: What'd you do in Spain?

GS: Well, I had a business—I built up a business and my kids got old enough to go to college, and I wanted to do something different. So, I was able to sell my business, and I guess you call it change of life or something? My brother-in-law, my wife's brother, lived in Spain. He was in the military and he got out—he was a lawyer, a judge advocate, and he got out of service. He was stationed in Spain and loved it there, so he stayed there. And we always would go and visit with him. And I always liked that way of life; it was very gracious in the 1970s, in spite of Franco. It was a very safe place to live and extremely cheap. You went home for lunch, and you always had a maid. (laughs) I mean, it was a great life.

MH: Right. What city did you live in?

GS: Madrid. And then, by coincidence—after five years we were going to come back anyway, 'cause I said to my wife we'd only go for five years. My kids got out of school. They would come over on their holiday to visit, and my youngest son wanted to—I had a business there, by the way, of importing handmade carpets, area rugs from Portugal, which are very high designer-type area rugs. Anyway, he wanted to take over the business. He had just graduated college, and I had heard from a guy that I sold my business to, had a branch in Florida, and he asked me if I would come back and run the branch.

MH: What kind of business was that?

GS: It was servicing supermarkets with health and beauty aids and non-food items. And that was my original business in Philadelphia that I had sold. So, anyway, I came back,

and it was an excuse, because really, I was going to go back to Philadelphia and had no particular job or business in mind. Anyway, I came back to Florida and I ran that business for two years. Its major customer was Food Fair; don't know if you know it.

MH: Don't know Food Fair.

GS: Well, anyways, it was a major chain, and I think they turned their name into Pantry Pride. Whatever. But anyway, it was a sole business, which was a mistake on the part of the guy who owned it, who didn't want to listen or diversify, et cetera, et cetera. So, anyway, that company went bankrupt. And I then went into the printing business, through my brother-in-law—I forget who, but somehow I got a line on a company that printed Christmas cards. Anyway, I got into the printing business, and it was a social—it was not commercial printing, all personalized, social-type stationery and accessories. And I had that until I retired, about six years ago. My wife, alongside, always worked at Bloomingdale's. She still works at Bloomingdale's; she's an eighteen-year veteran.

MH: And gets the discount.

GS: And has a permanent employee discount.

MH: There you go.

GS: And I keep telling her, I don't know what good it's going to do me because when she retires, I'm not going to have enough money to shop in Bloomingdale's.

MH: Right. When did you first tell people what you had seen at Mauthausen?

GS: Well, actually, frankly, I think it was only about three years ago, four years ago. There was an affair here in Boca Raton sponsored by the Holocaust Museum of Washington. There was a branch here in Florida, and there was either—I forgot how, but there was some publicity, and they were requesting—the theme of that luncheon was liberators and survivors. And anyway, my wife urged me to go to that luncheon, she came with me, and we went there and there were only about three liberators. By the way, it was very well attended; there must have been 300 people there. There were some guests. But other than the three, maybe four liberators, the rest were all survivors and their families, which were the older Jewish people from all over, you know, Florida, came to that luncheon.

And at that luncheon, a reporter from the *Palm Beach Post* was there and came by my table and asked—because, by the way, we wore special pins they gave us, with a ribbon, to distinguish us as liberators. And anyway, she interviewed me and asked if she could come and have a full interview and bring a photographer. Which, a few weeks later, she did; they came to my home. And I think that was the first real time, you know, other than talking to some of the men that I met from my division; every time we'd meet, we'd tell war stories to each other.

MH: Did you ever tell your kids about it?

GS: Specifically, no. They never asked. No.

MH: Was there a hesitation on your part to talk about it?

GS: No. I mean in retrospect; of course, this has come up before when I would meet with my boyhood friends. We're all grown now and living in different parts of the country. And they were all in different branches of service. We would meet, right after the war; we were all young married people and we—after a while, I was asking these questions. We never spoke to each other about the war. We were all involved with earning a living, we were involved with a brand new family, young children, you know, and we would constantly visit each other—we were all childhood friends—and to this day I still have about four of them who are still living. And even now when we meet, we make some jokes about it, this or that, but never really exchange—never really exchange any of our experiences. You know, other than where we were—you know, one was in the Navy, one was in the Coast Guard, another one was in the Signal Corps. Two of them happened to stay—not that they stayed in, they were in the reserves and they were called back in. They went to Korea. That part we did discuss, because it interrupted their occupations at the time.

MH: Were you a religious person before the war?

GS: No, not religious per se, no. I knew my religion and I attended services.

MH: You're Jewish?

GS: Yes. And by some coincidence, and on the occupation, just as an aside, I did play piano and accordion. And the Catholic chaplain got a hold of me, and I would travel with

him on Sundays playing a field organ, which everybody thought was quite funny. He always tried to convert me, but anyway, I would play the organ for him. No, I wasn't religious. I mean, I knew what was going on with the Germans—vis-à-vis the Jewish people, which of course got my dander up.

MH: I was going to say, did you respond to it differently than the other guys because you're Jewish?

GS: Possibly. There were three or four other Jewish boys in my troop—not my platoon, but in my troop. About 120 men in the troop, you know. And we would, when the occasion would be that we had a break in a particular day, we would talk about that at the end. And we really saw after Mauthausen. I think we were more involved in the early part of the war after Malmédy, because that was universal. The first two days after that, there were no German prisoners taken. It was an acknowledged fact, until the officers' word came down that that had to stop. And we, in our particular troop, we had a real reason to see it since pulling those bodies out of the frozen snow. But I think that had more of an impression at that point than the concentration camp did—until a few months after the war, when it really started to sink in and there was more and more publicity—or news, I should say; not publicity, but news about it. It started to sink in, what atrocities that went on. At that point, no.

MH: Have you ever been confronted—or confronted people who denied that the Holocaust occurred?

GS: No. No. No. I find that hard to believe, it's so well documented. I mean, I've never been confronted by that. If I ever was, I could very easily shut them up by showing them pictures, my own pictures. You know, no. And I can't understand how anybody could even be—

MH: They're out there, and people believe them.

GS: I assume, but I mean it's so asinine. The world knows exactly what it is, and there's such a photographic history of it. But anyway. There are nuts all over.

MH: What are the pictures that you still have?

GS: One of them is of the ovens, another is a pile—a pile of bodies—another one with prisoners walking around. I had originally, I don't know, about nine or ten; things keep getting misplaced.

MH: You don't have any pictures of the GIs in the camp, do you?

GS: In the camp, no. I have pictures of—some taken during combat, in my troop, in my vehicle. And certainly I have them on occupation.

MH: Do you have a picture of yourself over there?

GS: Oh, yeah, sure.

MH: What I'd like to do if possible is get a picture of you from over there during the war, and then a current picture of yourself.

GS: You mean, at my present age?

MH: At your present age, yes. Yes, 2008 version.

GS: Yeah, fact is if I could find the write-up—I guess it's still available; I have some copies, if I can find it—that this reporter did. It was a big picture of me now, and I think then. And I still have my uniform, by the way, believe it or not.

MH: If you have a picture, an actual photograph of yourself, not from a newspaper, that would be better. What I'd like, if it's okay with you, if you could send them to me, I could just scan them and send them right back to you.

GS: Yeah, I can do that.

MH: I'll send you an e-mail with my address, and if you could send me a photo of yourself from the war and something current, that'd be great. And I'll get it right back to you. I promise. Anything else you can think of related to this? Oh, I know what I wanted to ask you: there was an 11th Armored Division unit, and I don't know what unit I've been trying to find that actually met the death march from the slave labor camp

called Berga, where there were American POWs there that were being worked to death. And I've talked to two of the guys who survived that camp in the death march. In fact, one of them lives not that far from you. But I haven't been able to find any of the guys from the 11th Armored who saw that march. You wouldn't happen to know anybody, would you?

GS: I don't know of anybody, but I have a very detailed history of—gee, if I knew that just last week, I could have easily gotten the answer.

MH: That's why I asked them to distribute the fliers at the thing. I was hoping that somebody would see it.

GS: Well, everybody—sure, it was out of the tables. I'd seen it. You know, that's why I picked one up. And I saw of course that you were over—how'd you make out, by the way, in the storm?

MH: We got, like, twenty hours of wind, and no big deal. It didn't even rain a lot.

GS: So, I knew you were—I picked it up and figured I'd contact you. We had there the division historian, and there were guys from all the—well, not all, but the majority of the units, at least one or two or three from each of the units. So, I could have asked. But I can find that out from you—I could let you know on that.

MH: If you could, I'd really appreciate it, because it's like the other side of the story. You know, I know how these two guys felt when they finally saw the Americans, 'cause they didn't think they'd make it for another twelve hours before they dropped dead.

GS: They weren't from the 11th Army—

MH: No, they had been captured around the time of the Battle of the Bulge, and they were sent to Stalag IX B—let me turn the recorder off for a second—

End of interview