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Robert J. Straba oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, September 21, 2008

Robert J. Straba (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: Your name is Bob or Robert?

Robert J. Straba: Robert J. Straba.

MH: S-t-r-a-b-a?

RS: Right.

MH: And what's your address?

RS: ...

MH: Okay, and your phone number's.... And what's your birth date?

RS: October 3, 1919.

MH: Okay.

RS: I'm old.

MH: Well, people ask me why I'm doing this book: I just turned sixty-five, and I said, "Well, I get to hang around and talk with guys who are in their eighties and nineties, and it makes me feel young again." So, where were you before you went into the Army?

RS: I lived in Santa Monica, California, and I worked in Burbank, California. I worked for the Lockheed Aircraft.

MH: At Burbank Airport?

RS: Pardon?

MH: The one that was at Burbank Airport?

RS: Yeah.

MH: The Skunk Works?

RS: Yeah, I was a small tool repairman.

MH: Oh, okay. When did you go into the service?

RS: Well, when I went into the service in September of 1942, the war was raging on at that time. And I was about to lose my status. I had a special status because I worked in aircraft, you know, and they were running out of people, I guess. And I read an ad in the paper where they said they were hiring—not hiring, that you could enlist in an outfit and you'd be recognized for your abilities if you were a mechanic of some kind.

MH: Okay.

RS: So, I enlisted in the 14th Armored Division, a maintenance battalion. It was the 136th Ordnance Maintenance Battalion, Headquarters Company, and I enlisted as a PFC [private first class]. That wasn't much of getting ahead, but I wasn't a private, anyway.

MH: This is true.

RS: Yeah. Then I took my basic at Camp Perry, Ohio, and when I was at Camp Perry, Ohio, I was assigned to go to a specialized school, they told me. They lied to me. They told me I'd go to a gyroscopic control school in Aberdeen, Maryland, and they sent me there, but it turned out that I was in the tank track repairman school. In other words, I was using tools that were just the opposite; they were like a crowbar. I had two tools, a crowbar and an open-end wrench, for disengaging the bolts on a track and dropping the track, and then a team of two of us would inch a forty-ton tank off the goddamn track, and then turn the track over to where the pad's off on the other side.

MH: I didn't realize tank—tank tracks are—

RS: Pardon?

MH: Tank tracks are reversible?

RS: Yeah, the tread was a big rubber pad that you wore it out on one side, and then turn it over and wear it out on the other side.

MH: I didn't know that. I didn't know.

RS: Anyway, you can imagine how I was disillusioned with the goddamn Army then, you know, because they lied to me. Or they probably—it's just the way the Army operates. In other words, they put people where they need them, and it don't make any difference what the hell somebody told you, you know.

MH: Especially a recruiting sergeant.

RS: Pardon?

MH: Especially a recruiter.

RS: Yeah. Well, anyway, I ended up in Camp Chaffee, Arkansas, and I hated the work I did. And then one day there was a bulletin on the bulletin board about people were being taken into an organization called the Army Specialized Training Program. And I was willing to get into anything, I didn't care. I wanted to get into the paratroopers, but I wasn't able to do that because I wore glasses. Anyway, I got into the program, the Army Specialized Training Program, and they sent me to the University of Michigan. My hometown was only about seventy-five miles distant, so that was a great deal.

Anyway, then, to make a long story short, they dissolved the training program because of the political aspects of it. In other words, these young guys were going to college, where there were fathers and uncles and people were drafted in the Army, given basic training and sent either to the South Pacific or to Africa at that time. And here these young bucks were going to school, which bothered the civilian population. Anyway, I ended up in the 19th Armored Infantry Battalion [of the 14th Armored Division].

MH: Okay. When did they finally send you guys overseas?

RS: Pardon?

MH: When did they send you guys overseas?

RS: We went overseas in—I think it was October of 1944. In other words, then, the next year, the war ended. We were there for the winter.

MH: Okay.

RS: Froze our ass off over there in France and Germany.

MH: What was your first combat?

RS: The first combat was in the town of Gamsheim. Well, no, wait; back up a minute. When we got overseas, they sent my company up in the Maritime Alps while all the division equipment was being unloaded and loaded up with ammunition and gas and getting it all ready for combat. I was in the armored infantry, so we were up in the hills,

and we done patrols, did patrols. And the Germans were on the next mountaintop. We were in the Maginot Line, the French Maginot Line, and we would run patrols over into where they were and they would run patrols over to us. But we were just like them, we were pretty cagey, and we avoided each other, you know.

Eventually, then they got things all ready for us, so they pulled us out of the mountains, and then we joined the main division and then we headed through Paris and ended up in—I don't remember the town, but the history of the division was—wherever the hell it was we ended up, anyway, I was with them until the end of it. I was one of the few that made it in the squad that I started with.

MH: Right. What did you know about the concentration camps?

RS: The first—we went through many concentration camps.

MH: Tell me about the first one you saw.

RS: Well, the first one that I guess I was really shocked about was—you know, this was—okay, it got to be the—well, I can't remember the dates or anything—

MH: That's okay.

RS: —but it was Dachau.

MH: That was the first one? No.

RS: Yeah, we didn't take that one, but the 45th [Infantry Division] did. And I'd heard all these stories about—you know, like, we overran small ones. See, they had hundreds of these camps, and most of them were—you know, they were real small. In other words, there weren't many prisoners. I don't know how many, I have no idea.

MH: I mean, they had camps that had 50 slave laborers, 100 slave laborers.

RS: Yeah, that's what they were. They were for sorting the people out and using them as slaves, you know, in either farming or in manufacturing or whatever they could. They were very efficient in sorting people out.

MH: What was the first one of those that you saw, do you remember?

RS: I have no idea. I can't remember.

MH: But, I mean, what did it look like? What did the people look like?

RS: Well, as I recall, they were mostly Polish people; and they were civilians, I think, because I don't remember seeing any that were in any kind of a uniform. They were usually civilian dressed, and they spoke some other language. I don't know; different languages, I think. But the one that really—that I saw so much of the way they handled the dead people was Dachau. You know, that must've been at the end of the war.

MH: Did you get to a camp called Mühldorf or Dachau III B?

RS: Was what?

MH: There was another camp that I'm told the 14th Armored got to, and it was called—it was one of the Dachau camps, but not the big one. It was called Dachau III B; another name was Mühldorf.

RS: The one that I remember most vividly is when we overran Moosburg.

MH: Okay, tell me about that one, 'cause I think that's the one I'm talking about.

RS: Well, Moosburg was the biggest one there ever was, from everything I've read since then. We never even learned the number [of prisoners], because they kept moving them ahead of us all the time, and we finally caught up with them. I remember we got there, like, late in the afternoon, and I was in a half-track at that time. And I remember we had a small firefight getting into the place, whatever. I can't remember; I think it didn't last too long. But anyway, the thing that impressed me was when we got inside. These guys, they were walking skeletons, some of them, you know? And they were in rags, and they were hungry.

So, Captain [Jack R.] DeWitt told the cooks—the cook truck finally caught up with us; usually the cook truck was so far behind that we lived off the land. We stole all the food we usually ate from the natives, wherever we were. This time, the truck was there, and he ordered them to make pancakes, because they had a lot of pancake flour, and they had some of those big five-gallon cans of marmalade or something like that. He said, “Feed those bastards; they’re starving to death.” Well, that was the worst thing we could’ve done, because a lot of them ate those pancakes and that heavy food, and it killed them. And we learned that later. Anyway, it was a noble gesture, but it was deadly to the bastards that ate the food. And the thing—that’s what I remember, is how they were wolfing down that food.

Then, the next morning, we took off again, and we’re chasing the Germans, wherever the hell they were, continuing in the attack until the war finally ended. We were near the town of Erding, as I recall; that was a German fighter base.

MH: Okay. But, if I can take you back to that camp you were in—

RS: Which one, Moosburg?

MH: Yeah, Moosburg. I really think it was Mühldorf and not Moosburg, ’cause I think Moosburg was a prisoner of war camp.

RS: Yeah, Moosburg was a—yeah, there were soldiers there that some of them had been prisoners for seven years.

MH: Ah. Okay.

RS: And then there were some that’d been there only two weeks; they were fliers that were shot down.

MH: In Moosburg.

RS: Yeah. As a matter of fact, I remember one of these fliers, a lieutenant, hooked onto us. He wanted to go with us just to kill a few Germans, he was so mad at the Germans.

He was with us for a few days, and then I don't know what happened. He disappeared. He must've got tired of killing Germans.

MH: I suppose. Did you have a chance to go walking through that camp?

RS: What about it?

MH: Did you have a chance to go walking through that camp?

RS: Did I ever get back there?

MH: No. At that time, did you have a chance to go through that camp, to go into the different buildings and that sort of—?

RS: Oh, no. The only ones—you know, I was always curious. I didn't believe all the bullshit that they were feeding us about propaganda, you know, about how the Germans were such vicious killers. Well, that isn't the way it was from my experience. In other words, these young German soldiers, some of them were just kids, you know. And they were just like me. Hell, I was—at that time, I was about twenty-two years old, so I was older than most of the guys I started with in my squad. They were usually eighteen year olds, so I was like an old man. My background was such [that] I didn't believe the bullshit they were feeding us from the very beginning about what the German soldier was like, you know. It was propaganda, most of it; it was trying to get us to hate them. That was the psychology I believe they promoted.

MH: Except when you were up against the SS, though. Wasn't that a different story?

RS: Well, the SSers, they were hard to identify until you killed one of them or captured one of them—and they were hard to capture, also. The only way you could identify them was by their insignia on their uniforms.

MH: Right. Or the tattoo.

RS: Pardon?

MH: Or the tattoo?

RS: I don't remember identifying one that way. I always could recognize them by the lightning-like design someplace on their uniform.

MH: Right. Okay. How many of those little camps, those slave labor camps, do you think you saw?

RS: Oh, I don't have an inkling. In other words, you've gotta remember, a soldier that's a private in an army, we didn't—although I was a runner most of the time, the last three months, I was with the commander of my company. I knew a lot about where we were going, because I would attend the staff meeting with the CO [commanding officer]. And so, I'd know, but to me, it was just another goddamn town, another village. It was endless. We just went from small town to big towns and every size town there ever was.

MH: And mostly just wanting it to be over so you could go home.

RS: Pardon?

MH: And mostly just wanting it to be over so you could go home.

RS: Yeah, that was the idea. I made up my mind when I realized at the very beginning how the Germans were good at picking off leaders. I said to myself, "Well, I'm not gonna be a leader," because those snipers were so good at picking out guys that were NCOs [non-commissioned officers] or officers. So, I managed to keep a low profile, and I was lucky. I had so many close calls. I could've been shot many, many times, and just by the grace of God, I survived.

MH: Were you wounded at all?

RS: Was I what?

MH: Were you wounded?

RS: I was wounded once, and it was—I never even got credit for it. I didn't even get a Purple Heart, which pissed me off after I found out that you could get five points for it. Yeah, some time in—it was about the time of Hatten and Rittershoffen. I got some mortar splinters in my buttocks. They were like needles, ragged like needle things that stuck in my butt, and I had one of my buddies pull them out. I didn't even go to the medics with it, because guys were getting their arms blown off, or their legs. In other words, I didn't want to bother the medics with a little thing like that.

MH: Right. I understand.

RS: But I was sorry later, of course, because I never got a Purple Heart. Out of the medals I got, that's one I didn't get. I should've.

MH: Did you have any other experience with the concentration camps?

RS: Well, I think one of the things that, you know, is kind of not one you'd want to brag about, but I remember in—I think it was Dachau. When I got over to see that, I went through it quite extensively. In other words, I was curious at how the thing was run. There was a room there off a room that was obviously an operating room, and it had all the doctors' instruments and glass cases and all the paraphernalia that the doctors use in operations. Then, adjacent to that, was a big room, and there were a lot of shelves in there, and there were pots. They were clay pots, they were about—I don't know, I guess about ten inches high. And they were sealed, and they contained the ashes of people that they had incinerated there. And then cut into the top, like, there was a seal; there'd be a clay pot, and the top had, cut in it, it would have the name of the individual and the profession. I remember I picked up one that had—he was a carpenter, it said, in German, whatever the word was. He was a carpenter, and it gave his age, when he was born, and when he died. I don't know what the hell the purpose of that was.

Anyway, I took the thing, and I took it back with me to the place we were garrisoned, or where we were set up in tents. I showed it to some of the guys, and we tried to figure out why it was. And then, I don't remember. I think when we left the area, I just left it under the cot when they reassigned me to the 45th Infantry Division, and we were getting processed to go to the invasion of Japan. Because I had 49 points, and if you had 50 or more, they were shipping you back to the States for a furlough before you went over and got in on the invasion. So, my luck, again, I missed it by one point.

MH: So, what'd they do with you?

RS: Pardon?

MH: What did they do with you?

RS: Well, they sent me then—I was assigned to the 157th Infantry Regiment, the 1st Battalion, A Company, the first platoon. I was a machine gunner in a machine gun squad. That's what I was assigned in the 45th. In other words, I carried rifle, an M1 rifle. I was an expert with a rifle. I could hit anything I could see.

MH: When did they finally send you back to the States?

RS: I got back to the States after they dropped the bomb. We were in Camp Chesterfield, and then we heard the war ended, you know, because Truman dropped the bomb. So, I don't remember. I got back to the States in September, I think it was.

MH: Did you get out of the Army then?

RS: Yeah, then I got out of the Army. I was discharged from the Army and I returned to my hometown, which was Owosso, Michigan, where I just came back from right now. I spent the summer there. Anyway, that's where my parents lived and all my relatives. And, of course, I had a girlfriend back there. Anyway, I got back there, and I was then part of the 10 million servicemen that returned all over the country. We were all looking for work, and there wasn't any. That's when I decided to get the hell out of Michigan, and I headed for Arizona, because it was warm there. I wanted to get out of the cold, and then I went to the University of Arizona under the GI Bill.

MH: What'd you study?

RS: That's another interesting story. When I got there, it was in January, and I was still in uniform. By the way, to get there, I hitchhiked all the way to Arizona, and had no trouble getting rides. I remember when I landed in Tucson, Arizona, I'm wearing this heavy overcoat, you know, and ODs [olive drabs]. I'm in uniform, and I have the high rank of PFC stripes on my uniform, and with the 45th patch. The guy let me out right downtown in Tucson. Are you familiar with Tucson?

RS: I've been there, but not for a long, long time.

MH: At that time, the most prominent hotel was known as the Pioneer Hotel, and he let me out just right near there. I looked over at the hotel and saw those red neon signs that spelled B-A-R, you know. And so, I headed for that bar. The sun's shining bright and it seems warm, and I headed for the bar to have a cold glass of beer. So, I went in the bar: it's a typical bar, it's dark, you can't see anything when you walk in. But I could make out that on the left was the bar with the barstools, and I saw there was a space open between a couple people, so I sat down up there and ordered a glass of beer.

Then my eyes adjusted to the darkness, and it turns out that, on my left, was a soldier in a suntan outfits. He was with the 45th Infantry Division, a staff sergeant. And then, on my right, was a guy in civilian clothes. He was a Jewish lawyer. I talked with him a little bit, and he was telling me how happy he was that the Jews established this place in Israel, their own country and so on. And then I got talking to the soldier, and it turns out, he said, "What're you doing here?" and I told him I came to go to school. He says something like, "Well, you're too late. The classes have already started. We're into the next semester." I couldn't believe it. I understood I was there at the beginning. I had some misinformation.

Anyway, to make a long story short, he said—him being an infantryman and I being infantry, he said, "Hell—" and I told him, I said I had a couple hundred dollars in cash and that's all I had to my name, and a musette bag with everything I owned. Here I was practically broke, and I thought I was going to go to school, and I'm too late, he tells me. And he says, "You can stay with me," and he says something like, "Fuck 'em. Why don't you just start going to class with me like you've already enrolled?" So, that's what I did. I started in the business administration course with him. He gave me his little card that showed where I had to go.

Oh, and the other interesting thing: in order to clear whatever you had to do, you had to go through the ROTC [Reserve Officers Training Corps]; that was a land grant college. And there was a woman secretary there that, when I stopped there to get the form filled out so I wouldn't have to take ROTC, she said, "You ought to consider taking ROTC, because they pay \$110 a month, and all you have to do is go to a couple classes each week, and they'd start you out in the advanced. You'd start out like you'd already completed two years because of your three years plus in the Army." So, I said, "Sure, I'll sign up," because of the \$110, not that I wanted to be in the military again.

But, anyway, to make a long story short, it turns out that I turned out to be pretty good, and I got to be the cadet-colonel of the whole corps. So, when I graduated, I had the distinguished graduate designation, which meant that I was a second lieutenant and had the same status in promotions if I went in the regular Army as a West Pointer. By then, I had married. I had a wife, and I came back and I told her that's what I wanted to do. We were staying in student housing, and she was dead against it. She said—her idea of the

military was her idea of the way things were—she knew the National Guard in Owosso when we were growing up, and they were a bunch of toughies, and they were the guys that were in jail half the time. You know, they were the roughnecks. And that was her impression of what the Army was. So, she was dead against it. Being in love, I went along with her and decided I would not choose the military.

So, at the end of two years in business administration, I quit, and I moved back to Michigan and got a job as a manager in a sporting goods store. I was there about six months and didn't like that, and I switched to Montgomery Ward as a trainee for management. I got to be an assistant manager, the worst job I think I ever had in my whole career. I was assistant manager for a year in Alma, Michigan, a little hick town, a farmers' community. And from then, I got a job with the Michigan Inspection Bureau as a fire inspector, and then that's the career I followed. I got to be—when I got in the Bureau business, automatic sprinklers were my specialty.

MH: I see. How many children did you have?

RS: Well, at that time, we just had a little boy, my eldest, my son.

MH: But, ultimately, how many?

RS: Pardon?

MH: Ultimately, how many kids did you have?

RS: Five. I have four daughters, two of them are RN nurses and two are—what do they call them?

MH: LPNs?

RS: LPNs, that's it: licensed practitioners, or whatever. And they're all practicing, they're all working.

MH: Okay. Well, I—

RS: By the way, my son right now is in Africa.

MH: What's he doing there?

RS: He's working for some contractor; he's teaching security to the police and the military of that. Some country—I forget what the hell country—in Africa.

MH: Okay. Let me ask you one other question. DeWitt mentioned this: Do you know Leo Gordon?

RS: Did I what?

MH: Do you know Leo Gordon?

RS: The Air Force?

MH: No, Leo Gordon, who was the peep [jeep] driver?

RS: What was the—?

MH: Leo Gordon.

RS: Oh, Gordon, yeah. Oh, hell yes. He was our driver.

MH: Do you have his phone number?

RS: Uh, yeah.

MH: Could you give it to me?

RS: Yeah, just a minute.

MH: Thank you.

RS: Leo Gordon is—let's see here....

MH: Okay, thank you very much. I thank you very much for taking the time to talk to me.

RS: Okay. So, I'll probably run into you someplace?

MH: Well, I'm gonna see about the reunion in Florida.

RS: Yeah, you'll probably be there at that reunion?

MH: Well, I may try. It depends on what kind of deadline I'm on.

RS: Yeah. Okay, well—

MH: Thank you very much, Bob.

RS: Okay, fine.

MH: I'll send you a letter that tells you a little bit about the book that I'm writing, although—

RS: Okay, very good.

MH: Okay. Take care. Bye-bye.

RS: Bye-bye.

End of interview