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Edward A. Terepka oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, June 12, 2008

Edward A. Terepka (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: Could you just give me your name and spell it for me?

Edward A. Terepka: My name's Edward A. Terepka, T-e-r-e-p-k-a.

MH: And your address, please?

ET: ...

MH: And you're 727—

ET: Are you're going to send me a copy of whatever you—

MH: Yes, if you'd like that. Yes.... What's your date of birth, please?

ET: 11-22-25 [November 22, 1925].

MH: Twenty-five [1925].

ET: I'm sorry, I'm sorry. 11-25-22 [November 25, 1922].

MH: Okay. So, how old are you now?

ET: I'm in my eighty-sixth year.

MH: Eighty-sixth year. Where did you grow up in the U.S. before you went in—?

ET: Newark, New Jersey.

MH: In Newark. And did you enlist, or were you drafted?

ET: Drafted.

MH: So, where'd they send you?

ET: Where? What do you mean, where?

MH: Where did you go to basic?

ET: Oh, Alabama, at Fort Worth—Fort McClellan, I believe it was. Alabama.

MH: And ultimately, you came out of there and they put you in what unit?

ET: Well, they put me on a boat up in New England, Fort Myles Standish or something like that. That was the embarkation point. Put me on a boat, went over to Europe. We were the first unit that landed—we went in on one of those landing crafts, you know, the LSTs [Landing Ships, Tank]. Yeah, we were the first unit after the invasion that landed there. We unloaded there, got on a train—boxcars, you know—rode for I don't know how long, and then wound up in a camp, which I don't know what it was. It was a replacement depot, whatever. Then they took the bunch of us, took us to an area, and said that the outfit that was in there was wiped out. They assigned us to the 45th Infantry, C

Company, 157th Regiment, whatever. And we went in there at night, you know, digging in foxholes or whatever, and [they] said, “The enemy is out that way. Wait till morning; you’ll see what’s going on.”

MH: That was your introduction to combat?

ET: That was my introduction to combat. Every time a rabbit would run by, of course, everybody’d start shooting at it. Didn’t know it was a rabbit. All green recruits like me.

MH: What were the veterans doing to you when they saw you acting that way?

ET: There were no veterans.

MH: There were none.

ET: None. Well, maybe the platoon sergeant was a veteran. I became the lieutenant’s runner. That was—I was his communication between the sergeants of the three platoons. In other words, when we were in attack, I had to run back and forth and give them the instructions that he wanted them to do.

MH: That exposed you a lot.

ET: Yeah. But, hey, I was young, I was nuts. Yeah. And the one lieutenant got shot, got shot up. Another lieutenant got shot up, and another lieutenant got shot up. I went through three or four lieutenants.

MH: Were you ever hit?

ET: Once. I wound up in the hospital and was, you know, in there for four or five days and let out.

MH: Was it shrapnel or a bullet?

ET: No, no, no. It was—we were in some stupid—what was it? Aschaffenburg, I believe it was. We were—when Patton’s push on his 4th Armored Division, that big run, you know, they pulled us out of south France or wherever we were and put us on Patton’s tanks. And when Patton’s tanks got bogged down, we jumped off and we had to go attack the town or whatever. This is all from memory, you know.

MH: Of course.

ET: And at Aschaffenburg, I remember going across a bridge. I was in front with the captain, you know, walking this long—and I heard this pop and I said, “Hey, Captain, somebody’s shooting at us.” He said, “No, no, no.” I said, “Captain, when the bullets start to pop, they’re close to your head.”

Well, pretty soon they start to hit guys, and then we got off; unfortunately they had an artillery, German artillery, up on the hill watching us and started shelling the shit out of us. And this, I got from the other guys. A shell landed so damn close to me, it threw me up in the air, I don’t know how far. I come down, landed running on my feet, and yelled to my group that was with me, “Follow me,” and we ran into a cave. And that’s all I remember for four or five days. They told me at the hospital, “You’re okay, go back to your unit.” And you’re in the middle of Germany someplace, they don’t even tell you where your unit is; they just discharge you out of the hospital.

MH: I was going to ask that question: How do you find your unit? They’ve moved on.

ET: I still don’t know how the hell I found ’em. But I found ’em. You know, ask questions of other soldiers: which way did the 45th Infantry, which way did they go, and whatever. I wound up back at the unit, anyway. That’s what I remember.

What I remember—you’re interested in Dachau.

MH: Yes, or any of the other camps you may have seen.

ET: Well, no, that’s the only one that I was involved in. You know, I was talking to my brother after you called. I remember good things, but a lot of the bad things I don’t remember and, you know, details. I remember seeing the railroad cars, the gondolas. You know what they are, the low sides?

MH: Yes.

ET: Bodies, stacked like logs in the gondolas, ready to go into the crematory inside Dachau. We got there, we let the prisoners, whatever, whoever they were. They were skin and bones. And we let 'em out. And I remember we had to go round 'em up again, because the doctors were afraid they'd kill themselves eating whatever. We had to round them up again and bring them back into the compound.

MH: How do you do that? These are people who've been prisoners—

ET: I don't remember. See, details like that, the biggest things, but I don't remember details. But I remember that they had a community shower in this building where they had all shower heads. They'd bring all the prisoners in, as I understand, and they'd turn the gas on, gas them. And they had a whole row of ovens, and they cremated them. And right outside that door was a pile of ashes; I'd guess four or five feet high. Those things, I remember about that. Yeah.

MH: Did you have any interaction with the live prisoners, with the inmates? Do you remember talking to any of them?

ET: No. No. We were so damn mad—the guys that I was with, we were so damn mad at the Germans, anyone with a German uniform, we shot 'em.

MH: And that was in the camp?

ET: Anyplace, outside the camp, in the camp, 'cause we were so damn mad at what we saw. These people were just bones. And what disturbs me, you know, every once in a while somebody comes up with, "This Holocaust is a bunch of bullshit." You know. We saw it.

MH: I was reading, actually, something today where a GI was quoted as saying, "We were so mad that it's a good thing the war ended soon, because if it had gone on, we would have killed every German we saw."

ET: Well, I didn't feel that way. But that couple of days that we were there, anything that had a German uniform on, we shot 'em. We were so damn mad. That was—you know, that's my recollection.

MH: How long did you stay there, at Dachau?

ET: I don't know. Because we went on into Munich, and the last place that we hit was Munich, attacked. And by that time the Germans were just—they weren't fighting back. They were defeated. You know, we'd climb—we'd chase 'em down and they're just walking, like, "Go ahead, shoot me, I don't care." It was—whatever. Anyway, when we got into Munich, they'd rebuilt our regiment or company or whatever, and put us on trucks and shipped us back to Le Havre, France, to go to invade Japan.

MH: Which, fortunately, didn't have to happen.

ET: Oh, we were—that was great, because we were in the embarkation whatever, Le Havre, France. We were there ready to get on a boat; the boat was out there, all provisioned to go to Japan. And Harry Truman dropped the atomic bomb. When we got on the boat, we headed straight for Massachusetts. In six or seven days, we were in Massachusetts, one of the first boats back. And they treated us like kings.

MH: You said you remember the good things. What was the homecoming like?

ET: Oh, it was—they gave us anything we wanted. Gave us anything, whatever, and all I wanted to do was get home. And then they gave us a fourteen day pass or something like that. Anyway—

MH: How long did you stay in the Army?

ET: I was in there two years. That was it. I wasn't in there long. I come in near the end. But I saw quite a bit of action, 'cause they were moving fast then. Yeah. Siegfried Line, we got on that, and we hit—do you know about the Siegfried Line?

MH: Yes.

ET: Yeah. We hit that, and they didn't realize it was there. Oh, we were riding on Patton's tanks, and all of a sudden bang! Jump off, dig in, in the woods. And we jumped off, dug in the woods there, and all night the tanks kept coming back and firing and

shooting at those pillboxes or whatever. Next morning we attacked them, 'cause the tanks couldn't go.

MH: You're dug in—that was winter, too, right? Or was that spring already?

ET: Well, I don't remember. I know I remember digging and getting two feet of snow out of the way to dig a hole. And by the time you dug two feet of snow away, the hell with the hole; you just cuddled up and went to sleep. And the bad part was that they had that—what do they call it, trench foot? So, they said, "Okay, you got a buddy. You buddy up with him. If he gets trench foot, you get court-martials." So, I told my buddy, "Don't worry about a court-martial. You get trench foot, I'll shoot you." Anyway—

MH: Somehow, I knew that was coming. (laughs) I'm sorry for laughing.

ET: Anyway, we survived that. You know, you carried two, three pairs of socks in your pocket. Change your socks every night and you were all right, 'cause we had those shoe packs and all that crap. It wasn't too bad—and I was young then. So, you know, it wasn't too tough.

MH: You can put up with more when you're young?

ET: Oh, a hell of a lot more.

MH: And you also do stupider things when you're young.

ET: Yes, real dumb things. Right. You know—and there's a lot of little things. Like, I was a lieutenant's runner. I carried messages for him or whatever. And I remember one guy sittin', and his leg was kind of bent. I said, "Hey, your leg looks funny." He said, "Yeah, it's always been that way; I broke it when I was a kid." Half hour later, he was laying in the attack, his leg blown off. Gone. I said, "How you feeling?" He said, "Fine. No pain." I said, "Great." The medics came along. You remember things like that. You remember chasing Germans out. The ideal foxhole is an L-shape, covered. Two guys grabbed that one, jumped in it. They shelled us that night; the only guys who were hit were the guys in the L-shape, because shrapnel came in and bounced off rocks and went and killed 'em. Funny things like that happened that I remember. You become a fatalist.

MH: Did you think you were going to survive the war, or not?

ET: Oh, at that point I didn't give a damn.

MH: Really?

ET: Really. You're there, you're young, you're doing what your country wants you to, and you know. Hey, they drafted me, I'm here, I'll do whatever you want me to, but then I want to go home. Yeah.

MH: Did they tell you at all about the concentration camps, or did you know—?

ET: No.

MH: You didn't know anything.

ET: No. 'Cause we hit it, we left, on to Munich, and then from Munich back to Le Havre to get on a boat. And I know we got in Munich and the war ended, and we had to take all the vehicles away from the Germans so they wouldn't travel. We had a pile of bicycles or motorcycles like ten feet high. That's what we did in Munich while we were there. Guard wine cellars, too.

MH: Which has its good points.

ET: Oh, yeah, that was good duty (both laugh) guarding the wine cellar. Yup.

MH: In later life, did the things you saw and the things you had to do come back to you?

ET: Not really. Not really, 'cause like I say, I remember the good things, the fun I had.

(someone says something in the background) What's that?

Clarice Terepka: You were a couple years older.

ET: Yeah, I was a couple years older. I wasn't a young kid, because when I first became draft age, I was 4-F. They found blood in my urine. I worked at a defense plant for a year, they called me back and I was okay, and I went in. So, I was a little older than the normal draftee.

MH: How old were you?

ET: Jesus.

MH: About twenty, twenty-one?

ET: About there. No, maybe I was nineteen. No—okay. Anyway, twenty, twenty-one, who knows? I worked in a defense plant for a couple of years, and then they drafted me. Yeah.

MH: What'd you do when you came home from the war?

ET: Oh! See, before I left, I was working with a consulting engineer. I was a draftsman, a planner for him. We traveled around the country remodeling foundries, steel mills, things like that. I'd draw the plans or whatever—you know, the specs—and that's what I did when I got out of the Army. The first phone call I got was from him, and he wanted me to come back to work. So, I went back with him, and we traveled around. Then he went out of business, because he didn't like to fly. And we were getting jobs, we'd get on a plane to go to Detroit and Boston or whatever, and he hated to fly. He was a white-knuckle guy. He figured, "What the hell, I'm not going to fly anymore." So he picked up some other jobs in South America and whatever, he said, "The hell with it!" and we went back.

We went to work for a company in Garwood, New Jersey. He went there, got a job, and they took me, too. I worked in the engineering department, plant engineering, design engineering, and that was my experience. And it got to the point where I was designing a lot of the stuff and whatever. They fired the chief engineer, and they called me in and told me that I would get the job as chief engineer for the plant—but I didn't have a degree. And that was the president of the company. So, I looked at him and said, "Well, if I'm as far as I'm going to go, I quit." And I went to college. Got an engineering degree.

MH: From what school?

ET: New Jersey Institute of Technology.

MH: And then after you got the degree, then what?

ET: Oh, then I went back. See, the plant there, they wanted me, so any summer, any vacation, they wanted me back there. And when I got my degree, they wanted me back there. So I went to work for them as plant engineer. And, then, well—

MH: When did you get married?

ET: (to CT) When did we get married?

Fifty-two [1952]. Yeah.

MH: You're not allowed to forget that.

ET: No, no. I remember it better than she does.

MH: Oh, okay.

ET: Yeah.

MH: And you have children?

ET: Oh, yeah, I got three kids. Greatest kids in the world.

MH: And grandkids?

ET: What's that?

MH: And grandkids? Grandchildren?

ET: Oh, yeah, I got five grandchildren.

MH: Do your kids or your grandkids ever talk to you about the war?

ET: No, they—you know, they're not interested in that.

MH: Okay. And basically, the experiences you had, you managed to leave them behind you. They don't crop up.

ET: Yeah, I believe I was lucky. 'Cause I was young enough—I came out of Newark, New Jersey, Down Neck Newark, where they raise 'em tough.

MH: What'd you call it, Down Neck Newark?

ET: Yeah, Down Neck Newark. They called it Down Neck.

MH: Okay. What does that mean?

CT: Tell him about when you were looking out of the hole to see (inaudible).

ET: Oh, yeah, the first night on the line. You mentioned where I go? It was the first night when they brought us on trucks, real quiet; find a hole and get in, because they had wiped out—Germans had wiped out that whole regiment. Anyway, I was the lieutenant's runner and the captain—so they gave me a two-way radio to get the guys in the holes and whatever. And every time—like I said before, every time a rabbit'd go by, everybody'd be shooting. And I remember I'd sitting in that foxhole, and the captain calling me saying, "Hey, hey, what's going on?" I said, "I don't know, they're shooting at—there's a hell of a lot of shooting." He says, "Well, can you see?" I said, "I'll have to stick my head out of the hole to see, and I ain't sticking my head out of the hole." (MH laughs) Anyway, the rest of the war, that captain reminded me of that. Every time he'd go by, he'd say, "Eddie! Stick your head out of the hole, see what's going on." My wife just reminded me of that.

MH: Was that captain with you when you got to Dachau?

ET: I don't know.

MH: Anything else you remember from being in the camp at Dachau?

ET: No. Very little. I remember the buildings that were—you know, lined up, wooden buildings. I remember the cremation place. I remember the boxcar with bodies in it. Other than that, I don't remember much about it.

MH: Were you given specific orders once you were in the camp, or was it—?

ET: Well, we really didn't go in the camp. We attacked it and opened up, and the Germans disappeared. We opened the gates and the damned people ran out. That's what I remember. I don't remember, you know.

MH: But that's—

ET: Finally, after going through all that crap, I came back to the States and they looked at my past and they shipped me down to Texas in an engineering—corps headquarters, engineering section. So, anyway.

MH: Okay. Anything else you can think of?

ET: Not too much. You're more interested in the concentration camp parts.

MH: And the experience, the military experience, leading up to it, 'cause the last six weeks of the war, American units were liberating camps almost every other day.

ET: Yeah.

MH: I know there's a still a fight between the 45th Division and the 42nd Division over who liberated Dachau.

ET: Yeah, well, we were there. And that was a lot of—you know, you read that *Stars and Stripes* or whatever the name of that paper was. And they [would print] “Patton’s Armored Takes” this town, and we’d say “Bullshit!” They stopped—we went in there as infantry and took it. You know. And it was always the 42nd—the 42nd was the New York division, right?

MH: 42nd was the Rainbow Division.

ET: Where were they from?

MH: Pretty much all over the country, I think.

ET: Oh, yeah?

MH: Yeah.

ET: Okay. Well, I got put in the 45th Infantry. So, it didn’t matter who you were with. Hell, we all did the same job.

MH: I’m just curious—I’ve never asked this question. What’s it like riding on a tank in a combat situation?

ET: Well, hey, let me give you an experience. We were in the attack—I forget just where—and our captain got shot, pretty bad. So I got him, and I helped him back to where we came from. And there was a tank, right? And I said, “Hey, the captain is hurt bad. How about taking him back to first aid?” They said, “Well, throw him up on the tank, back of the tank, and hold him.” Okay, I will. So I pushed him up on the tank, got on there and hold him. They start driving back; the Germans start to shell us. They closed the lid on the tanks. I was sittin’ out on the goddamn tank with a wounded captain. There’s shelling all around us.

MH: And they’re still moving?

ET: Oh, I bitched at those guys like crazy. And we went through—oh, another thing. Memories, you know. After that, see, I had to get—oh, that was the Maginot Line, or Siegfried Line or whatever it was.

MH: Okay.

ET: Okay. And I was heading back to catch up with the unit, and I run by this pillbox—the Germans had these continuous trenches and pillboxes, tying all the pillboxes together. And I was going by this pillbox, and I look in the doorway of one. I see a German. So, I stopped with the rifle, and I waved him to come on out. And he comes out and another one comes out, and another one comes out: five of them come out. And what do you do against five Germans? So I pointed 'em “That way” toward the rear. I said, “Go that way.” They went that way, I went the other way. (MH laughs) You remember things like that.

MH: Right. I mean, I spent almost a year in Vietnam, so I can relate to remembering funny things that happened in the midst of weird crap.

ET: A lot of funny things happen you remember. Some things, you don't want to repeat. But that is generally—

MH: Did you ever have the inclination that you needed to be a hero? And do something really stupid?

ET: Well, no, I got the Bronze Star.

MH: For what?

ET: Who the hell knows? All I know is I got the Bronze Star. Yeah, got the Purple Heart, got the Bronze Star. Yeah. I really don't know why the hell I got it. But I must have done something good for somebody.

MH: The citation is probably a little more specific.

ET: What's that?

MH: I said, the citation is probably a little more specific. (laughs)

ET: Maybe, I don't know. But I got a Bronze Star and whatever.

(to CT) What'd you say?

CT: (inaudible)

ET: Oh, one thing: I went in Texas, or was it Louisiana? I don't know. I think it was Camp Polk, Louisiana, after the war. And I was in the engineering section, and there was—what the hell's that general's name? They called him the “enlisted man's general.” Anyway, he decided that the officers had skeet ranges and things like that. He was going to go skeet range with the enlisted men. This is in Corps headquarters. So, they gave me the plans and—

MH: Was that Clarence Tinker?

ET: No.

MH: Hap Arnold?

ET: No. Sounds like—I think it's McClellan? No.

MH: Okay. That's okay.

ET: I forget what his name was. Anyway, he was known as the “enlisted men's general.” Anyway—

(to someone else) What's that? Yeah.

All right, they gave me the plans and go to the prisoners—it was a prisoner of war camp; they had two. So, every day I'd go pick up prisoners of war to do labor on this building the skeet range. And I'd pick up, I don't know, ten or twelve of them. And we'd go out

and we'd—according to the plan I had, we did whatever we had to. Yeah. I remember we were almost done with it, and a couple of officers came and they wanted to try the range out. So, what the hell, you know, you're looking at colonels and majors, and I was a sergeant. They start shooting. And the general's vehicle pulled up, and that general, he chewed my butt out for letting them shoot on this enlisted men's range. I don't know what the hell you want from me? Colonels and majors. Anyway.

But, these prisoners, because I treated them decent, one of them came out with a painting that he did of his—as he remembered his native land in Poland. Okay? And he understood I was Polish—Pollack, you know—and he gave me that picture. It was painted on—you know the Army used to get the sugar bags, XXX Sugar? He painted it on that bag and put it on a frame. And he gave it to me, because he said, “You were so good to us. You treated us like humans.” And I had them work. They did the work, and no problem. You know. But I've got that damn picture, that painting—it's about twelve by twelve, something like that. It's a nice painting. And I wonder—you know, it's an antique. It's painted on a sugar bag. I don't think there are too many paintings in the world painted on a sugar bag. I got it hanging in the house here, and we often wonder what the hell it's worth.

MH: I don't know. You know, it's hard to put a dollar value on it.

ET: Yeah, yeah. I'm not asking you, I just say we often wonder what it's worth, 'cause people spend a lot of money for stupid things.

CT: He could be a famous artist now.

ET: Yeah, he could have been a famous artist. He signed it with big letters, “F.K.” That was it, F.K., and he gave it to me. I'm telling you some of the nice things that happened to me.

MH: Yeah. Okay, well, I thank you very much for your time.

ET: Okay. Now, you'll send me whatever you're going to do? And your name and whatever?

MH: Do you have an e-mail address?

ET: E-mail? Yeah.

MH: What's your e-mail?

ET: ...

MH: Okay. You don't have a picture of you during the war, do you?

ET: Oh, Christ. Yeah. I got a picture of the bodies—you got the picture of the bodies in the car?

CT: We got it somewhere.

ET: Yeah, we got a—

MH: A picture that you took?

ET: I don't know who took it.

MH: Yeah, the—

ET: Somebody took it, I got a copy. I've got some pictures of us during the war. Yeah, I've got some pictures. Not many.

MH: Okay. I'll send you my address; I'll just e-mail it to you. If you have a picture of yourself in the war, you know, I'd really like to borrow it and make a copy or scan it, and I'll send it back to you.

ET: Now, what do you mean by "myself in the war"?

MH: A picture of you, you know—

ET: In uniform?

MH: In uniform, yeah.

ET: With a rifle?

MH: If you got it.

ET: Yeah, we got them; we got a couple of them. With my buddies; somebody took a picture, I got a copy.

MH: Okay. I'll send you an e-mail, and I'll tell you about the book. Thank you very much. I really appreciate your time.

ET: I hope I—it's such a long time ago.

MH: I understand, and I hope you're feeling better.

ET: Yeah. Well, I got a heart problem right now.

MH: Ah. Okay.

ET: Okay, Mike.

MH: Take care of yourself. Bye-bye.

End of interview